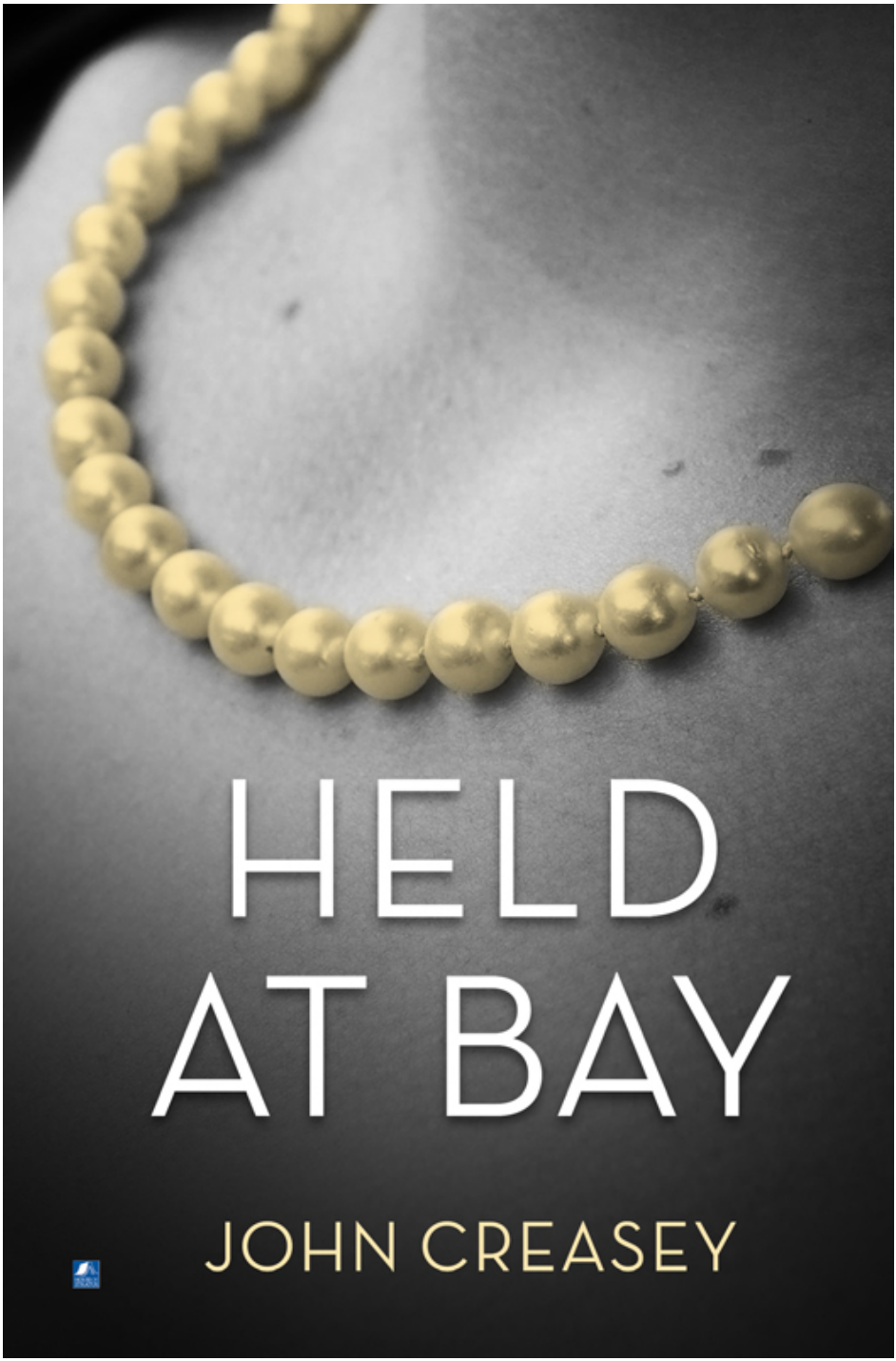
HELD
AT BAY
JOHN CREASEY

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Held at Bay

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About the Author

John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard, The Toff, Dr Palfrey and The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the 'C' section in stores. They included:

> *Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.*

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers' Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey's stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

Three Gentlemen Talk Business

Through the silence that had fallen on the three men in the room the striking of a match came very clearly. The short man leaning forward on a settee turned his head irritably towards the smoker, opened his mouth as though to protest, and then apparently realised its uselessness. Jules Granette had always been irritatingly cool, and it was typical of him that during the tense silence he should have been quietly stuffing his pipe. He had almost too many English habits.

Granette was tall, fastidious in his dress, always a little aloof from his two companions. Olling, the short man whose head seemed joined to his shoulders without the help of a neck, liked to call him a pseudo-gentleman, but no one was really sure.

Of the trio, Granette was by far the coolest, Olling the most irritable and yet invaluable in certain respects to the success of the syndicate, and Kelworthy – who had just finished speaking, and whose words had shocked Olling and startled even Granette – was an uncertain quantity always. But for Kelworthy the syndicate would never have been inaugurated. He was the acknowledged leader, and most of the operative ideas came from him. Yet there were times when he bordered so closely on panic that Granette took control of the situation, coolly, capably and usually with good results.

They were oddly assorted, the men in the drawing-room of Jacob Kelworthy's Hampstead house. Granette liked to taunt Olling by saying sardonically that they were the dullest trio of jewel thieves in existence. Olling had been a specialist in crime for twenty years, but he hated to be called a crook. Kelworthy did not appear to care what anyone said or did, providing the scheme was handled successfully.

They had been working together successfully for over two years, and their newest scheme seemed perfect. It had a comfortable margin of safety.

Until ten minutes before, when Olling and Granette had entered the room together, neither of them had dreamed that there was the slightest flaw in the arrangements. Now Kelworthy had blasted their complacency.

"So the Baron *is* going to interfere," said Granette slowly.

Kelworthy drew a sharp breath. He was older than either of the others, a tall, scraggy man with silvery white hair, pince-nez on a thin, beak of a nose, and usually with a white stubble over his cheeks and chin. His skin was ultrasensitive, and he shaved only once a week. Yet he would scoff at the idea of growing a beard. That was typical of Kelworthy: in the heights one moment, in the depths the next, he was never reliable except in the novelty of his ideas and the thoroughness of his preparations.

Kelworthy did the thinking for the party. Granette did most of the actual work, which often included burglary and housebreaking, while Olling was the fence. As a buyer and seller of stolen jewels, he had no equal in London.

"Yes, yes," Kelworthy said in his high-pitched, querulous voice. "That's the truth, and we must face it."

Olling stood up abruptly, and paced the room. He littered cigar-ash over the thick-piled Indian carpet, banged his shin against a small Sheraton cabinet, swore and rubbed the bruise.

"Yes, I can see." His voice was hoarse and harsh, and he sounded almost illiterate. "But this is the best and the safest job we've ever planned. We're not going to cut and run, are we?"

Kelworthy blinked at him, mutely. That was one of the old man's irritating tricks. Granette took his pipe from his lips and smiled. His cultured, pleasant voice was restful, tinged though it was with sarcasm. It was not so much what Granette said as the way he managed to make it sound offensive that always annoyed Whittaker Olling.

"When Kelworthy has found a way of outwitting the Baron, and I have snatched the jewels from under his nose, you will sell it, *hein?* It will be so easy. But does it not occur to you that we might have some difficulty in beating the Baron to the jewels? He is no fool, *le Baron.* I have always understood him to be dangerous in the extreme. As you say, a cracksman extraordinary. So?"

"There's no call for your damned sarcasm!" snapped Olling. "I

know it looks awkward, but we can find a way of avoiding it. Damn it, those five stones are worth two hundred thousand pounds, and we've got the Isabella already. We know where the others are, but the Baron *can't* know."

"I would not like to take that for granted," said Granette. "He has an easy way of obtaining information. We secured it from Anita de Castilla, but there is the admirable Don Lopez himself, as well as that so clever son."

"You seem very sure Mannering is the Baron," Kelworthy piped. "Suppose you're wrong?"

"I am not," Granette assured him. "Gus Teevens told me, and explained his very sound reasons for reaching this conclusion. The reputable John Mannering is the Baron, and the Baron is after the five Jewels of Castilla. And so are we. The Baron," went on Granette suavely, eyeing first Kelworthy and then his pipe, "has a well-deserved reputation. If he is coming after the other four stones, then we must move very fast to win. Even if we get them, the Baron might find out who has beaten him, and come after us. We cannot afford to have him on our heels, can we? Or will you deal with him, Olling?"

Kelworthy spoke before Olling could explode.

"Are we in any worse position than the Baron, Granette?"

"How do you mean?" Granette looked interested.

"It's easy enough to see, if you'll only use your wits," said Kelworthy. "The Baron – or Mannering – must be in constant fear of the police."

"And so are we," said Granette.

"Maybe. But supposing we get rid of the Baron first? Put him into police hands. They would be very pleased."

"But how could we do it?" drawled Granette. Olling's little blue eyes were gleaming, his nostrils blunt and almost vertical; he always reminded Granette of a snuffling dog. With his neckless body and his flat, florid face, he was an ugly specimen of humanity.

"By trapping him," Kelworthy said. "We have the Isabella Diamond. The Baron will want it. If we let him know we have it, he will come after it. We can leave the diamond in the safe at the office, allow him to get in, and keep him there. Then we can send for the police." Kelworthy paused, as if waiting for their congratulations. "Remember, if the police find him with the

Isabella, it will not be dangerous to us. That diamond's *ours.* If we wait until we have the others, gems we have no right to, we would be in trouble ourselves."

Olling's breathing was more stertorous than ever, and Granette was smiling a little, with his grey eyes narrowed.

"I knew it!" Olling burst out, stepping across the room with a cigar raised in a pudgy hand. "We can do it, we can shop the Baron and then the road is clear."

Granette smiled.

"It is risking the Isabella," he said. "The Baron *might* defeat us and escape with the stone, but I think it is worth a try. Where is the Isabella now, Kelworthy?"

"In my pocket, where do you think?" demanded Jacob Kelworthy. "We can use a paste stone, yes, a paste stone, to trap the Baron. Well, how about that?" He cackled excitedly, his yellow teeth showing. Kelworthy was feeling on top of the world. Olling was chuckling. Granette himself was smoking his pipe, as composed as ever.

"Yes, I think it worth a trial, although I would not like to be sure we can catch the Baron. Others have tried, have they not, clever men at that kind of thing, and Scotland Yard is not filled entirely with fools. The Baron – one man alone – has kept them guessing for two years."

"We'll get him!" Olling declared. "It's as easy as kiss-me. We're too smart for that gentleman."

Olling broke off, and stared across the room.

Granette had been looking at him, but now he followed Olling's gaze, while Kelworthy half-turned in his seat towards the door. All three were absolutely still. Olling's mouth gaped open, Granette's self-possession deserted him, while Kelworthy's pince-nez had fallen to his knees, and his thin hands were trembling.

The door was wide open, although none of them had seen it start moving. A man stood on the threshold, a tall man dressed in a dark, immaculate lounge suit. They could see only his eyes, gleaming hazel eyes that seemed to be laughing at them. His nose, mouth and chin were covered with a blue handkerchief that served as a mask, while in his right hand, pointing steadily towards the trio, was an automatic pistol.

Olling gasped.

"The—*the Baron*?" He jumped back to the wall, for the man who was called the Baron advanced slowly, closing the door behind him. His voice was touched with mockery.

"What fame, Olling. Granette, be wise and don't move your right hand, even for matches. Kelworthy, if you know what's good for you, take the Isabella Diamond out of your pocket and put it on the table. As I am after the five Jewels of Castilla, I thought I'd start with you."

Olling's heavy breathing seemed to intensify the silence, which was broken suddenly, explosively, when Kelworthy's pince-nez dropped from his knees to the floor.

Kelworthy started to bend down to retrieve them, but he stopped as the Baron's voice spoke again.

"You don't seem to know what's good for you, Kelworthy. After that little testimonial, I'd have thought you knew that I wasn't to be played with. Granette, I've warned you about your hands, now you'd better put them up. Up, I said!"

There was a sudden fury in the words, a hardness that seemed like steel. Granette's hands went upwards, thumbs near his ears. Olling was gasping and licking his lips alternately, the most frightened member of the trio, while Kelworthy, almost blind without his glasses, was blinking furiously. The Baron could see the myriad wrinkles on the lids of his watery blue eyes.

"Excellent," murmured the Baron. "It's as pretty as a tableau. Kelworthy, the Isabella Diamond is in your pocket, or you're a liar. Take it out and place it on the table. I'll give you five seconds."

No one spoke while Kelworthy stood up, every limb shaking. He took the diamond – wrapped in cotton-wool – from his waistcoat pocket. He looked taller even than the Baron, a scraggy weed of a man whose grey tweeds hung loosely about his bony body. He put the diamond on a table that was within his reach, and the stone tapped against the table as his fingers shook. Then he stood with his back to the wall, facing the Baron and the gun.

"Very nicely done," applauded the Baron. He moved forward, his left hand extended towards the table, his right steady about the gun. He took the Isabella but left the cotton-wool, and slipped the gem into his waistcoat pocket. All the time he was

looking at Kelworthy, and all the time Granette's dark face was set angrily. In the Frenchman's grey eyes there was a glint that suggested he was dying to make a fight. The Isabella stone was worth fifty thousand pounds.

The Baron's automatic was said never to be loaded with anything stronger than ether-gas. Granette moved forward very slowly, inches at a time. Olling was behind him, but there was no hope of help from the short fat man. Olling was almost frightened to death. Granette's shoes made no sound on the carpet, and he kept his hands above his head while the Baron went on easily: "It's the first time I've met you, Kelworthy, and I can't say it's a pleasure. I'd expected something better for a master crook. That is what they call you, isn't it?"

For the first time Kelworthy found his tongue. His high-pitched voice cracked, but the words were clear enough, for out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Granette moving forward.

"You fool, Mannering, you bloody fool! Do you think you can get away with the Isabella? I'll have the police on you in thirty seconds after you've left, I'll—"

"Garrulous men are often bluffing," murmured the Baron, and there was a gleam in his hazel eyes. "For once you seem to have a stone that is honestly yours, and it must be heartbreaking for you to lose it. Hoist with his own petard, they say. And I was going to say—"

Granette was no more than two yards away from the Baron now, and he leapt forward from his toes, hurtling through the air towards the Baron. It looked as though he would crash into the cracksman before the Baron could move. But with a speed which made Kelworthy gasp, the Baron dodged to one side. Granette was moving too fast to pull up, and the Baron helped him on with a left to the side of the head. At the same moment the Baron's right leg shot out. Granette tripped and went sprawling with a thud that shook the pictures on the walls.

While Granette was still falling, the Baron drew back and sat on the edge of the table. Behind his mask his lips were curving, and his eyes were gleaming with a devil-may-care gleam.

He waited as Granette got slowly to his feet. Granette's eyes were glittering malevolently, and the Baron knew he had made an enemy who would never forget.

"Get up, Granette, and sit on the sofa with Olling. Be good,

like him, and I might not shoot you. Kelworthy and I have a little business to discuss, and I know you'll like to hear it. *Sit down I said*!"

There was a biting fury in his words, a glitter in his eyes that made Granette hurry to the settee and drop down.

"That's fine," said the Baron. "Now let's talk about the Castilla jewels."

Chapter Two

The Baron Interferes

The Baron seemed thoroughly at home as he sat on the corner of the table, with the trio of silent crooks in front of him. He put his automatic on the table, and took out cigarettes. He selected one, put it to his lips through a slit in the blue handkerchief, lit it and then tossed the case to Kelworthy. The old man caught the case and selected a cigarette with fingers that were still trembling.

"Pass it on," said the Baron amiably. He waited until Granette was smoking. Olling was puffing at his cigar. The Baron caught the case that Granette tossed back, and tucked it away.

"Now we're all friendly and sociable, I'll start correcting some impressions. In fact I'm probably twice as dangerous as you think – with you three."

"Why with us?" demanded Kelworthy.

"Because you're as wary of the police as I am," said the Baron. "I draw the line at shooting policemen, but I don't draw the line at anything with you. Don't run away with the idea that I carry only a gas-pistol."

"Who's been talking?" snapped Kelworthy.

"Call it a little bird," said the Baron. "I know that for the past two years you've been as busy as I have with stolen gems. But I don't like your methods. Do you remember the night-watchman at Revel's Depot, who was in hospital for seven months, Granette? Using a knife is going too far."

"You can talk," muttered Kelworthy. "The things you've done —"

"We're discussing you, not me," said the Baron. "Try and remember it. Another thing that interested me in you was your interest in the five Jewels of Castilla. They're not gems I'd like you to handle. I didn't come for the Isabella tonight, I came to talk to you. In fact, if you hadn't mentioned you were carrying the Isabella, I might not have known you had it here. Very

careless, Jacob, and it proves that you talk too much."

"For how long did you have the pleasure of listening to us, Mannering?" asked Granette suddenly.

The Baron turned speculative eyes towards the Frenchman.

"I listened from the moment that you started talking. I followed you and Olling from the Elan, and opened a window while you were coming through the front door. It's surprising how policemen and thieves never worry about burglar alarms. But you've one wrong impression. What gave you the idea that my name is Mannering?"

Granette's lips curled.

"Did you not hear me mention Teevens?"

"Oh, yes. But I didn't imagine you were gullible enough to believe all Teevens says. Teevens and Mannering quarrelled bitterly, and Teevens would like to get what he calls revenge. Mannering and I are excellent friends, although what would happen if he knew I was the Baron I really begin to wonder. Get the idea out of your head."

"Most unconvincing, Mannering," Granette said tartly.

"A lot of very convincing things will happen unless you give up the idea of stealing the five Jewels of Castilla. Which brings us to the crux of the matter. Forget those stones, and you'll be all right. Go after them, and I'll guarantee to have the three of you parcelled up for the Old Bailey within a month."

Olling was breathing hard, his cigar dead. Kelworthy's wrinkled eyes were blinking, and his scraggy hands were folded in his lap. Only Granette and the Baron seemed self-possessed.

"Is that—is that a threat?" squeaked Kelworthy.

"How in heaven's name you manage to run this syndicate, Jacob, I don't know. You look like a corpse and you talk like a fool, but there must be a spark of intelligence in you somewhere."

The change in Jacob Kelworthy was astonishing. He stopped fidgeting, and his eyes no longer blinked, his voice was still harsh, but not querulous.

"That's more than enough. You'll be in jail long before we are."

"This isn't a game of I-say-you-say," retorted the Baron. "Little tricks like the one with the Isabella will neither harm me nor help the police. I've come with a straightforward

proposition. Stop the hunt for the five Jewels of Castilla, and I'll leave you alone. Go after them, and I'll break you."

The words sounded as bleak as a five-year sentence from the judge to Olling, who was feeling physically sick. After his one outburst, Kelworthy had quietened down. There was something in the Baron's confidence that was not only convincing, but frightening.

But Jules Granette laughed.

"You are over confident."

"Are you coming after the jewels?"

"Most certainly I am," Granette answered suavely. "The others are, also."

The Baron looked from one man to the other, his hazel eyes very hard.

"Right, we'll call it war, and you'll regret it very soon. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The Baron finished speaking while he was moving from the table. He continued to move towards the door. He was facing the trio all the time, guessing that Granette was aching to get at his gun. He put his left hand behind him, took the key from the keyhole, and opened the door. Before Kelworthy or the others realised it, the Baron was in the next room, and the door was shut and locked against them.

Olling, red-faced and swearing now, moved for the door.

"The window," cried Granette. "The window!"

Olling stopped in the middle of a stride, and swung round. Granette was already pulling the sashcord window down. It squeaked protestingly before there was space enough for Granette to squeeze through. Olling, filled with the courage of desperation, went after him.

Kelworthy stayed where he was, but took an automatic pistol from the drawer in his desk, every movement cool and deliberate. His eyes were narrowed, his expression little short of murderous.

In the hall of Kelworthy's house the Baron was moving very fast and softly. He reached the front door, opened it and then banged it to, without going out. He paused by the foot of the stairs, his lips curved behind his mask, his eyes as bright as ever. He heard the footsteps of the men on the gravel path outside.

To the Baron half the joy of cracksmanship was the risk entailed, and from a joust with a trio like the Kelworthy syndicate he got more fun than from a dozen straightforward robberies. He was telling himself that Kelworthy, Granette and Olling would be sure that he had left the house; the last place in which they would think of looking for him would be here.

The Baron went quickly upstairs. As he reached the first landing he heard the front door bell ring, and he guessed that Olling and Granette had returned from a fruitless chase.

Footsteps came from the landing above.

He swung round, catching sight of the shoes and ankles of a manservant hurrying downstairs. The Baron slipped quickly into the shadow of a big cupboard. If the servant glanced towards him, the game would be up. The Baron's hands were clenched, his heart was thumping, but the man was in too much of a hurry to look about him.

The Baron left the shelter, and tried the handles of the nearest doors. The first two rooms were bedrooms. The third was what he wanted – a small, windowless room, furnished as an office and with a small safe in the north wall. He went in as Granette and Olling crossed the hall, and he heard the closing of the drawing-room door. The servant's footsteps clattered along the passage by the side of the staircase but not upstairs.

The lamp on the landing spread a fair light into the office, showing the door of the safe. The Baron glanced round for the keys, without much hope, and then started to work on the safe. It was a combination lock, unlikely to give him much trouble.

His ears were strained to catch the clicking of the tumblers, and any sound from downstairs. He turned the knob first right, then left, listening carefully and smiling as he heard the tumblers falling smoothly. Two years before a combination safe would have baffled him: now it was only a matter of time.

He heard the final fall, and pulled open the safe. There was a wad of treasury notes inside, and he slipped them into his pocket, then picked up a leather wallet. He pressed his fingers against this, and felt half a dozen medium-sized gems inside. There was nothing else in the safe.

He took some of the gems from the wallet, glancing expertly at the blue glow of sapphires, stolen two nights before from a merchant on the way to Hatton Garden. The police and the

Press had both been searching for them.

He replaced the sapphires, more cheerful even than he had been before, slipped the complete haul into his pocket, closed the safe door, and stepped back to the landing. The murmur of voices was still coming from the drawing-room, with Olling's voice more high-pitched than usual. He reached the front door, opened it and walked to the porch.

In the light of the street lamps he could see Rideway Drive, where Kelworthy's house was situated, and the short carriageway with the gates wide open. He was still smiling when he leaned back and slammed the door.

The crash reverberated through the house and along Rideway Drive. It was still echoing while the Baron reached the drive gates and swung left, taking off his mask as he went, his coat tails flying behind him.

By the time he reached his car, a big Austin parked fifty yards away, Granette and Olling were at the gateway. They saw the red lights of the car, heard the whine of its engine and in the distance they thought they heard the Baron's mocking laughter.

Olling felt cold. Granette's eyes were very narrow, and his lips were stretched tight and thin. In both their minds was the single thought: they must kill the Baron.

Ten minutes later their malevolence reached its highest peak, for Kelworthy had discovered the rifled safe, and realised that the Baron had struck twice, in that sudden, devastating way that had made him notorious.

Kelworthy stood by the open safe, his yellow teeth bared, his hands shaking with fury.

"See that—see that? Every penny in the house, *and* the Delawney sapphires – ten thousand pounds as well as the Isabella! Forty—thousand—pounds!" The words came in a whisper now, and Kelworthy looked white and ill. "We must get them back, Granette. We must get them back!"

Olling muttered: "What about the police? The Isabella's ours."

"The moment we send for the police, I shall leave the syndicate," Granette said.

Kelworthy smoothed his stubbly chin.

"Granette's right, of course. We can't go to the Yard, we'd never be free of them. We must handle this ourselves."

"But—the Baron!" faltered Olling. "You heard him. He's

capable of doing what he threatened."

"He is one man, only one, and we are three," said Granette.

"You seemed scared enough of him," said Olling, his red face shiny.

"You confuse being scared and being careful," retorted Jules Granette. "We have to be up so early to catch the Baron, but that is no reason why it should not be done. For the moment – the other four Jewels of Castilla. The Baron will go after them quickly, *hein*?"

Kelworthy's eyes flickered. He was quiet and cool again now that his first anger had simmered down. Granette knew that in this mood Kelworthy was always at his best.

"That is right," Kelworthy said. "And we know that the second stone is at Archibald Price's house, in Chelsea. Can you get there tonight, Granette?"

"I can try." Granette spread his hands out, palms downwards. "It is ten o'clock. I will be there at midnight, and by two o'clock I shall telephone you, of success or not. Olling had perhaps best go home, he is in need of rest."

Olling was in a ferment of anxiety as he drove to his house at St. Albans, while Jules Granette was as confident as always as he made his way towards the Chenny Street house of a Mr. Archibald Price, in Chelsea. But the stealing of the Sea of Fire, the emerald among the five wanted jewels, took a secondary place in his thoughts. He was far more anxious to get at the Baron, and to make sure he died.

Chapter Three

The Five Jewels Of Castilla

The Baron had the Isabella Diamond, one of the famous five Jewels of Castilla, in his pocket, the Delawney sapphires and three hundred pounds taken from Kelworthy's safe. As he turned the car towards the West End he felt on top of the world.

There was every reason for the Kelworthy syndicate to be scared of him, for in two years he had rocketed to the heights of notoriety. The police of most counties in England were guessing, working and cursing, and his fame had spread overseas. When he was discussed without heat by Chief Inspector William Bristow, of Scotland Yard, and Superintendent Lynch, the Baron was admittedly the most efficient and elusive jewel thief in modern history.

Superintendent Lynch would point out half-jocularly that the Baron's success was not all luck by any means, and Bristow – who handled all the Baron cases in the Metropolitan area – was prepared to admit that. The Baron was skilled and daring. Bristow had forced him into many tight corners but never known him lose his nerve.

Bristow and Lynch could have confirmed Granette's belief that the Baron was one Mr. John Mannering.

Several hundreds of people would have scoffed at the suggestion or been aghast had they been offered proof, for John Mannering was something more than a figure in London society; he was the reigning lion. He had a reputation for immense wealth, a circle of aristocratic friends that could not be surpassed, and was a man-about-town in the old Edwardian style. It was known that he gambled heavily and was abnormally successful, that he collected precious stones, that no social function was complete without him, and that no man in the past five years had turned so many hearts and heads. Yet people who met him for the first time were surprised by his naturalness, disarmed by his easy smile and courtesy, and

amused by his lively wit.

In another sphere the Baron's reputation was as enviable, but there seemed nothing in common between the thief and the man-about-town, no reason why John Mannering should be the Baron.

Few knew that two years before he had been down to his last few hundred pounds, that in the bitterness that had followed a love affair, something had seemed to eat into his mind until he had found relief in cracksmanship. The zest for excitement, the tension of pitting his wits against the police and the people, the need for walking on a tightrope all the time, had saved him from disaster. Mannering was still the Baron, but the bitterness of the old affair was gone. He had money enough not to need to follow the 'profession', there was something in his blood that prevented him from leaving it. Cracksmanship seemed part of him.

There had been times when he had not broken open a safe or a door for several months on end, but some challenge would set him off. Now the five Jewels of Castilla brought the love of a fight to his hazel eyes. He was thinking calmly as he drove through the West End. He did not think Kelworthy was likely to send for the police – the Delawney sapphires would discourage that – but it was not the Baron's policy to take chances. If Kelworthy risked informing the police that the Baron had visited him, Bristow would pay an early visit to Mannering's flat.

So the jewels could not be taken to Clarges Street.

Mannering pulled the Austin into a side turning off Piccadilly, and took a large envelope from his pocket. He slipped the Isabella Diamond and the Delawney sapphires into the stolen wallet, putting the treasury notes on both sides of the stones so that it was impossible to feel the hard lumps through the paper. He sealed the wallet inside the envelope and addressed it to:

Mr. James L. Miller,
18, Lanchester Street,
Barnes Common, S.W.

He was smiling as he stamped the package and walked to the nearest pillar-box. Ten minutes after he had reached Piccadilly

the jewels and the money from Kelworthy's house were resting at the bottom of the pillar-box. In the morning a postman would handle them casually, for the envelope declared that Messrs. Benjamin Madle's were offering stupendous bargains in their Spring Sale. As the Baron, Mannering was careful in the smallest detail, which accounted for a great deal of his 'luck'. There was no Mr. Miller, but Mannering owned 18 Lanchester Street, and occasionally visited it. It was an excellent hiding-place for gems.

He felt very content as he sauntered back to the car, and drove slowly along Piccadilly. A dozen acquaintances nodded, and Mannering's smile was much in evidence. He reached Clarges Street, left the car outside, and took the lift to his flat.

Yet although he was smiling he was not entirely sure of himself. If Kelworthy had reported the burglary, Bristow might be waiting for him. Mannering's smile was set, and his heart was beating faster than usual as he unlocked the front door of his rooms. And then he had a shock.

The door was half open when he heard the unmistakable sound of a footfall inside the flat. For a second every muscle in his body went rigid. He slipped his hand into his pocket, and gripped the automatic – an empty one. He opened the door wide, trying to make the unknown visitor aware of his discovery.

A woman's laughing voice came: "I thought you were never coming, John."

Mannering stopped on the threshold, and relief flooded through him. Next moment the door closed behind him and he strode across the room. His arms went round the slim, graceful woman who came towards him.

Soon, Mannering was laughing into Lorna Fauntley's dancing eyes.

He had not seen Lorna for a month, and had not expected her in London that night. She was looking very lovely, in that rather dark, half-mysterious way of hers. Many people refused to call her beautiful, but to Mannering she was. Her skin was flawless, if a little on the sallow side, and there seemed something of the piquancy of the Southerner in her. Her full lips were parted, her dark hair unruly. She was dressed in a heather tweed costume, and to Mannering she brought a breath of the country, sending London dozens of miles away. Every movement she made

possessed an easy grace.

"At least you seemed pleased to see me," she said.

"I wish you were miles away, sweetheart, and now call me a liar." He took off his coat and flung it over a chair back. "When did you arrive?"

"I haven't arrived, I'm passing through," Lorna said. "Mother's tired of Scotland and wants to look at Menton. We're staying in London for one night."

"Thanks be for small mercies," said Mannering.

Beneath the shaded electric light it was easy to see what there was about him to fascinate women, for his tanned skin threw his white teeth into relief as he smiled, his dark hair was waving a little, his laughing eyes seemed to possess all the humour in the world. "I'd forgotten you had a key. Been waiting long?"

"Something over an hour," said Lorna. "So I sent for something to eat. Sit down and let me look at you properly."

"Why?" said Mannering, taking out his cigarettes. He eyed her reflectively, very content. Yet it passed through his mind that Lorna Fauntley was probably as responsible as anyone for the continued existence of the Baron.

If they could have married, the Baron might well have died a natural death. But she was already married and could not get a divorce.

They looked on the situation dispassionately now, and deliberately saw each other as seldom as they could, for they wanted marriage, not a substitute. No one knew of that barrier, and so it was rumoured that they were engaged. Mannering and Lorna Fauntley were satisfied to leave it at that, while the Baron's activities did a great deal to relieve Mannering's frustration.

They talked of trifles for a while, and then Lorna's eyes narrowed.

"Well, John. Busy?"

"Very."

"As the Baron?"

"As the Baron," Mannering agreed cheerfully. "And this time it's for a cause." He was flippant and smiling, but she sensed the underlying seriousness in his words.

"What cause?"

“For a beautiful girl and a noble aristocrat,” declared the Baron with a smile. “You know the de Castillas?”

Lorna’s eyes widened. “The de Castillas! But how—”

“Be quiet and I’ll tell you,” said the Baron. “You know they came out of Spain with precious little more than they stood up in? They’ve been luckier since. Don Manuel had money over here, and they’ve nothing to worry about over money. But worry,” said John Mannering with a scowl, “isn’t all about money. It seems that while they were over in Castile, thieves raided their home, and got away with most of the family jewels. Among them was the Castilla Crown.”

Lorna’s interest quickened. Through her father and Mannering, both jewel collectors, she knew a great deal about precious stones. She needed no telling that the five Jewels of Castilla, set in the old de Castilla Crown, was one of the most famous pieces in Europe.

“The long and short of it is that the de Castillas have offered a hundred thousand for the return of the five jewels,” he said. “And so—”

“You said this was chivalry,” said Lorna.

“Mostly it is,” said the Baron. “You’ve only heard a little yet. The crown was broken up, and the five jewels sold separately. One is in Paris, three are somewhere in England, and one is in New York, de Castilla learned that much, but there’s confusion. None of the owners of the stones *know* what they are. The individual weights and measurements were never made public, and the result is that the five jewels can only be traced by an individual who does know them. Beginning to see?”

“Yes. But if the weights aren’t known, how can *you* get them?”

Mannering chuckled.

“Young Juan de Castilla gave me all the necessary information, and the situation is simply this: Don Manuel will pay twenty thousand pounds for each stone, providing he can get all five. But no one who has the stones wants to sell. All of them have been bought through dubious channels. The only stone that has been on the market is the Isabella Diamond, which was bought by a gentleman named Kelworthy.”

“He might as well be Smith for all he means to me,” said Lorna. “And you’re going after them?”

"Yes," said Mannering, so quietly that she knew it was useless to argue with him. "I wasn't thinking of it when I first heard that they were wanted, but there are complications. Before I explain to you you'll have to realise that four jewel collectors in different places have gems from the Castilla Crown, not knowing where they're from. Pierre Panneraude, of Paris, has the diamond they call the Crown of Castile, a hundred and four carats, de Castilla says, and I'm prepared to believe him. Our Mr. Kelworthy has – or had – the Isabella Diamond. Archibald Price, probably the meanest collector in London, holds an emerald they call the Sea of Fire – all the stones, need I say, have the usual legends about them. I'd hate to tell you the story of the Desire Diamond, owned by a merchant-collector in Hatton Garden; a man named Salmonson, whom I don't know from Adam. The fifth stone is a ruby, the bloodstone of the Castillas, which Juan calls the Flame Ruby. Van Royton, of New York, has it. And," added Mannering, "they all know that someone wishes to buy the stones, but they've no idea that it is the de Castilla family."

"I've gathered that," Lorna said drily.

"It's important," smiled Mannering, stretching his legs. From the drawing-room in Hampstead to this flat, with Lorna at his side, seemed a million miles. "De Castilla made the offer for twenty thousand pounds apiece through Ferris, a reputable dealer in Hatton Garden, but Ferris can't get them. Jacob Kelworthy, with two friends, learned what Castilla wanted, and what he was offering. Kelworthy knows that the Don can as easily pay two hundred thousand as one hundred thousand for the stones, and will if he's pushed to it. Kelworthy is a kind of uncrowned king of crooks, leading a tight little syndicate. He decided to try to get the jewels, *bought* the Isabella, and aims to get all five, then offer them to Castilla at two hundred thousand pounds or a hundred per cent above their value. We now see where the chivalry comes in. I'd like to beat Kelworthy's syndicate to the gems, and sell to Don Manuel at his own fair figure."

"I can see that," Lorna said, and the expression in her eyes was mutinous, almost sullen. "You're inviting trouble from the police here, in France and in America, and you'll have Kelworthy's crowd on your back. Darling – it's too risky, far too

risky."

"I visited Kelworthy tonight, asking him to drop the game," Mannering said. "He refused, so I collected the Isabella Diamond from him, with the Delawney sapphires. The sapphires being stolen property, Kelworthy isn't likely to go to the police, but whether I drop out of the hunt or not, he'll probably come gunning for me. So I stay in, sweetheart. I'm glad you're going to Menton."

Lorna looked almost angry, and he guessed the thoughts passing through her mind. She hated the danger that always faced the Baron, but she understood the compulsion that sent him on these dangerous escapades, the zest he had for them. Suddenly, she threw back her head and laughed.

"All right, darling, I won't interfere. Let's get out somewhere, I want to dance."

Chapter Four

Fifty-Fifty

Lorna Fauntley and her mother were staying at the Elan. Mannering took Lorna back, reaching the hotel just after three, and after a night of furious gaiety. It was Lorna's way of facing up to weeks away from Mannering, with the knowledge that he faced the risk of capture so often.

Mannering was back at his flat soon after four. He made sure that no one had been there, undressed quickly, set an alarm for eight, and got into bed.

He was awake just before eight, and watched the sun shining through the bedroom window – the only time of the day he could see it in the flat. For ten minutes he went through a miscellany of Swedish exercises with his own variations, bathed, shaved, and rang to the service kitchen for tea. He was due at the Elan by nine o'clock to take Lorna and Lucy Fauntley to Victoria.

At eight forty-five on the dot his tea came, and with it the morning papers. Mannering wished the messenger boy good morning, poured out tea, and opened the *Daily Cry*.

The headline ran right across the front page in half-inch letters. He had seen such headlines before, practically word for word, but then he had been prepared; this was a bolt from the blue.

THE BARON BUSY AGAIN!

Mannering stood with a cup of tea poised near his lips. Very carefully he drank the tea, sat down and read through the letterpress. A little pulse beat fast at the side of his head, a sure sign that he was troubled.

The home of Mr. Archibald Price, in Chenny Street, Chelsea, had been burgled between eleven-thirty and two o'clock on the previous night, and nearly thirty thousand pounds worth of

gems had been stolen. There was no mention of the Sea of Fire, for Price had no idea he had ever owned that particular emerald. No one had seen the thief, who had burned open a strong room door with an oxy-acetylene burner, and on the stairs of the house had been one of the few things that could be used to identify the Baron. A blue silk handkerchief, with a slit in the middle.

A blue silk handkerchief, with a slit in the middle.

Mannering read the report twice, then stood up and went to his wardrobe. From the pockets of his coat he took a blue handkerchief, with a slit that enabled him to smoke while wearing it. He dropped it into the fireplace, and struck a match. The last embers were still smouldering, and the smell of burning was still in the room, when a knock came sharply at the front door.

Mannering pressed the service bell as he walked towards the door. He suspected who was outside, and his guess was right. Chief Inspector William Bristow, of Scotland Yard, a spruce, well-dressed man of medium height with his invariable gardenia in his button hole, his hair just a little greyer than when Mannering had last seen him, was standing there.

Bristow's features were good, his skin pale, and his upper lip was decorated with a close-clipped, nicotine-stained moustache. Mannering knew and liked him well.

Bristow nodded his head slowly, as though to say: "So you're at it again," and Mannering's smile looked the most innocent thing in the world.

"Well, Bill, fancy seeing you."

"Yes, fancy," said Bill Bristow. He walked past Mannering, and then started as someone else reached the door. Mannering was smiling at the messenger.

"More tea and another cup, Sam, please." He closed the door and sauntered back into the room, quite self-possessed. "It's a long time since we had tea together, Bill. I've a phone call to make, and then my time's all yours."

"Who are you going to telephone?" demanded Bristow.

"Lady Fauntley," said Mannering. "I was due at the Elan at nine, but I doubt whether I shall make it. One of the rules of life, Bill, is never to keep a lady waiting."

Lucy Fauntley was up and talkative; Lorna was already

downstairs, she said. He told her that he might be delayed half an hour, apologised for his haste, and replaced the receiver. Bristow was looking at the headlines on the *Daily Cry*.

"I'd hoped you'd stopped this business," he said heavily.

"I've never started it," said Mannering. Whether they were alone or not, he made no admissions. "You keep confusing me with the Baron, Bill, and one day it'll give you indigestion. But I've an idea that the Baron is feeling very annoyed at the moment."

"Why?" Bristow spoke sharply.

"For an excellent reason," said Mannering dreamily. "I don't believe the Baron was at Price's house last night. In fact I'm sure he wasn't."

"Why keep it up," said Bristow almost wearily. "You were at that place last night."

"My dear Bill, I was no nearer Chelsea than the Elan and the *Cat and Fiddle*. I can offer you several hundred witnesses that I was at the *Cat and Fiddle* from ten-thirty till two, if you want them." He was speaking with more seriousness than usual when he talked to Bristow, and the Chief Inspector was frowning. Mannering's alibis were usually slim, and this seemed water-tight. "According to this, Price himself was in his strong room at eleven-fifteen, before going to bed."

"He was," Bristow said. "And the burglary was discovered at just before two o'clock. You're *sure* you were at the *Cat and Fiddle*?"

"I certainly was. I don't know where the Baron was, but I don't think he was at Chenny Street."

"If you weren't, he wasn't," said Bristow, grimly.

The boy returned, and Mannering poured tea before Bristow could go on. He proffered cigarettes, and Bristow lit one.

"If you weren't at the place last night, then someone planted the handkerchief to frame you. That's it, isn't it?"

"To frame the Baron," corrected Mannering. "Not the kind of thing the Baron's likely to appreciate, is it?"

"Not from what I know of him," said Bristow. His expression was harder than usual. "That's very interesting—"

"For God's sake don't keep talking like a phrase book," said Mannering. "Are you satisfied I wasn't at Chenny Street last night?"

"I'd like to look round here first," said Bristow.

It was not the first time he had asked to search Mannering's flat, after a robbery, and generally the Baron made him welcome. It was an indulgence, he would say, because he was a friend of Bristow. But he did not feel indulgent that morning.

"You're not going to search without a warrant," he said. "If you want a warrant for this job, get it with pleasure. It might do something to get the silly idea that I'm the Baron out of your mind. All right, anything else?"

Bristow looked at him thoughtfully.

"Not yet," he said. "I'll get that warrant."

"Get it and be damned," said Mannering. "More tea?"

Bill Bristow had an acute sense of humour, although there were times when he was a little slow in seeing a point. For a moment he stared at Mannering angrily, and then he started to laugh. He was still chuckling, and Mannering was smiling grimly, when they left the flat together. They parted in Piccadilly.

Mannering went straight to the Elan. Lorna asked no questions, although she must have seen the papers. Mannering said nothing until he put her on the boat train at Victoria, and Lucy Fauntley – a middle-aged, good-natured and understanding woman – had been settled in her corner. Lord Fauntley, a peppery little financial magnate and jewel-collector, was in America on business, and the women were travelling alone.

"I'll phone you once or twice," Mannering said as they walked along the platform. "It was a false alarm last night of course. Some damned fool thinks it'll be useful to cross the trails."

"Just a damned fool?" asked Lorna.

"Please yourself," said Mannering, but she could judge the anger underneath the surface of his smile. "If it was anyone more than a fool, he's going to suffer for it. Don't worry, darling, we've been through worse than this. Bristow doesn't appear to think I was in two places at once. It'll be refreshing to work side-by-side with the police."

Mannering stopped.

Lorna wondered why, and then realised that he was looking farther along the platform. She saw the tall, thin, dark-faced man walking towards them, deep in conversation with a short,

florid-faced companion. Her first thought was that the short man had no neck. Her next was that Mannering was regarding them, and she heard his low-pitched words: "Granette, my sweet, is the tall one. Red Face is Olling by name." Mannering had his back to the newcomers now, and he did not think they had seen him. "They're making for the boat, and they're on the way to Paris or I'm a Dutchman. Find out, will you? On the train if you can or from Paris, and wire or phone me."

"Yes, of course," Lorna said, but she could not keep a vision of Jules Granette's handsome yet sharp-featured face out of her mind. She felt suddenly cold, and very afraid, although John looked completely at ease.

A guard's whistle sounded shrilly.

"Time to go," Mannering said. "Don't stay long in Paris, sweetheart, but travel straight through. That's a promise?"

"Mother permitting," she said. "She hopes to stay in Paris for a few days. Be careful, John, more careful than ever."

"Believe me I will." Mannering handed her into her compartment and closed the door. Lucy Fauntley leaned forward for a moment, to say goodbye. Lorna waved out of the window as the train chugged off, while Mannering turned and walked towards the barrier, fingering his platform ticket.

He was thinking of the third of the five Jewels of Castilla in Paris, and owned by a well known Parisian jewel-collector. Pierre Panneraude lived in the Champs-Elysees, and Mannering had been occasionally to his house. Panneraude's evening cocktail parties were almost as famous as his collection of diamonds, and the Crown of Castile – the Castilla stone – was one of his prize pieces.

Granette was almost certainly going after it.

Mannering was not so busy puzzling out the situation as he was wondering what he should do. Granette, of course, had planted the blue handkerchief at Price's house. Granette and the Kelworthy gang were determined to get him into the hands of the police. The obvious thing to do was follow Granette. On the other hand, he might be able to get the fourth stone, with Salmonson in London, while Granette was in Paris. It was fifty-fifty, and it would be fifty-fifty later, if they had two stones apiece.

Mannering knew that the big struggle would come when all

five stones were shared between him and the Kelworthy syndicate. He walked along Victoria Street towards Westminster, and every few yards saw a placard announcement:

THE BARON AGAIN!

He was beginning to realise the full danger of Granette's impersonation. Until that morning, the Press and the police had been quiet about the Baron, who had not been active for some months. Now everyone would be alerted, every newspaperman and every policeman would be watching for the Baron. His task would be doubly difficult. Every jewel merchant in Hatton Garden would be on guard – although the Baron had not yet struck at London's market place of precious stones – and every private collector would double his precautions.

Mannering walked along Victoria Street, and paused to look into a hosier's shop window. He could see the people walking on the far side of the road, and slowly his lips curved at the corners.

Mannering would have known Detective Sergeant 'Tanker' Tring anywhere in the world. Tring, a small, stringy man with a perfect knowledge of routine and a positive lack of imagination, was dawdling opposite the hosier's, and reading a midday paper. His bowler hat was always a size too large for him, and he was wearing big, brown shoes. Bristow knew that Mannering would recognise the sergeant, so Tring was on the trail simply to engage Mannering's attention. There must be another man from the Yard nearby, someone whom Mannering did not know.

But one thought persisted in his mind. Salmonson of Hatton Garden had the Diamond of Desire. Granette was out of England, and could not go for it. The time was ripe for an attempt on Hatton Garden, and even before he reached his flat his mind was made up.

The quicker he started the quicker it would be over. With luck he might even get Salmonson's diamond, and fly to Paris in time to beat Granette to Panneraude's house.

The gauntlet had been flung down, and at heart he knew that nothing would stop him from taking it up.

Chapter Five

Exploration

Mannering did not go to his flat immediately. The first task was to find his second shadow, and to lose him as well as Tanker Tring. Ten minutes earlier he had almost been depressed. Now he felt excited.

He reached the pavement by Westminster Station, hesitating outside a jeweller's and fancy goods shop facing Big Ben. Tring was on the same side of the pavement, and Mannering entered the shop. As a salesman approached him he angled himself so that he could see Tring, and his eyes shone when a well-built youngster approached the sergeant: obviously Tring's second string.

The man was dressed in blue serge and a bowler hat, normal enough, especially in a plainclothes policeman. His face might have been called ordinary, but his nose was pushed a little to one side. His eyes were blue, keen and alert, his chin full and heavy.

"*Good* morning, sir," said the salesman for the third time.

"Sorry, I was day-dreaming. You've some wrist-watches in the window at five pounds; I'll take one."

"Certainly, sir," said the salesman. He was astonished that a daydreaming customer should buy a watch with no more than a casual glance at it. He was so curious that he followed him to the door, and saw him bang into Sergeant Tring.

The salesman knew most of the men at Scotland Yard, and his eyes widened. He heard Tring grunt, and saw the handsome customer's flashing smile.

"Why, Tring, of all people! Keeping busy these days?"

"Plenty to do," said Tanker Tring glumly. He was a dyspeptic man, who despaired of ever catching the Baron. Like Bristow, he had a deep respect for Mannering. "Can't grumble, considering."

"Considering what?" asked Mannering amiably.

"Things," said Tanker Tring darkly. "I must be going, sir."

He walked towards the Yard. Mannering knew that he was deliberately disarming suspicion, and chuckled to himself when he saw the keen-eyed young man. It was the easiest thing in the world to avoid a shadow whom you recognised.

He took the tube, booked to Piccadilly, changed at Charing Cross, and nearly lost his follower at the Piccadilly line there. But the Yard man was careful, and scraped into the train as the automatic doors closed. Mannering alighted, apparently without haste, at Piccadilly, then slipped to the opposite platform, instead of up the stairs. He was back at Charing Cross in ten minutes. There was no sign of the Yard man, who was at that moment standing in the roundabout beneath Eros, wondering how on earth Mannering had managed to dodge him.

Mannering went into a cloakroom and set to work. He slipped rubber sheaths over his teeth, making them look discoloured and unlike his own, and fitted cheek pads into his cheeks. The disguise was good enough to prevent him from being recognised at a casual glance, which was all he wanted just then. He went upstairs, after tipping the attendant, and beckoned a taxi. He walked stiffly, and his head was bent forward, lessening his height.

No one followed him.

Twenty minutes later he was walking along Wine Street, Aldgate, towards a house sandwiched between two doctors' residences. He knew the place well, and he was not surprised when a tall, almost white-haired man with his left coat sleeve hanging empty, opened the door before he knocked.

Flick Leverson was perhaps the best-known and most successful fence in the East End. Mannering had often worked with him, and had come to like the man. Leverson, with his courtly manner, his easy smile and his scrupulous fairness in all details, was a character in a million. Mannering did not know, but the left arm had been lost in an air crash. He did know that the *objets d'art* in the large room into which Leverson led him were genuine; Leverson was a real lover of the antique.

Leverson closed the door, and pointed to a chair.

"It's some time since I had the pleasure of a visit. But you've been busy again, I see."

Mannering had long since given up pretending that he was

not the Baron to Flick Leverson.

"So a lot of other people think," he said. "But they're not altogether right. You're thinking of the Chelsea affair?"

"Naturally." Leverson looked puzzled.

Mannering accepted a cigarette, eyed it for a moment and then glanced back at Leverson.

"Do you think I'd leave a handkerchief behind, when there was no alarm and no haste?"

"I was surprised," Leverson said, without altering his tone. "Wasn't it you?"

"It was not."

"That's an ugly trick. Have you any idea who it was?"

Mannering sent smoke streaming towards the ceiling, and leaned back in his chair. He looked unworried, although he was watching carefully for the one-armed fence's reaction.

"Granette, of the Kelworthy syndicate," he announced.

The effect was instantaneous. Leverson stiffened for a moment with a cigar half way to his lips. There was a glint of anxiety in his grey eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mannering. Granette is one of the few men I cannot help you with. He is a lone worker. Olling sells all his and the syndicate's stuff. I've heard Granette is dangerous, and that he carries a gun."

"I'll be careful," Mannering promised. "Can you give me any information about them?"

"None at all," Leverson said. "I only wish I could."

"Pity, but it can't be helped," said Mannering. "Well, I'm thinking of going to Paris, Flick, and I want a place there where I can pick up some tools, and if necessary leave a parcel safely."

"I can help you there," said Leverson, promptly. "Do you know Paris well?"

"Reasonably."

"Then you'll know the Rue de Platte, just off the Place de la Republique. There's a shop there, owned by a man named Grionde – G-R-I-O-N-D-E. I'll wire him a message to expect you sometime within—"

"The next week."

"He'll have whatever you want, and you can trust him completely," declared Leverson. "Is that all?"

"I'm afraid not," said Mannering. "Do you know anything of

Salmonson, the Hatton Garden merchant? I've never dealt with him."

"Don't," said Leverson bluntly. "He can't be trusted. Unless, of course, you were thinking of the Baron taking an interest in him."

"I was," said Mannering.

"I can think of no one who deserves trouble more, unless it is the Kelworthy syndicate. I won't rant about Salmonson but be sure that he is one of the most unpleasant members in the trade. He has perfected a scheme of blackmail that the police can't break, and half of his stock is obtained from women who have been indiscreet over love affairs. Is that enough?"

"It's exactly what I wanted to know," Mannering said.

He left Wine Street ten minutes later, feeling very cheerful. There was always more zest in robbing a man of Salmonson's type than men like Don Manuel y Alverez de Castilla. Mannering wondered how he had obtained the Desire Diamond. He took a taxi back to the West End, removed what disguise he had used inside the cab, and soon afterwards entered the shop of Mr. William Salmonson.

He was quick to notice the grille gate thrown back from the shop door. The grille was made of inch thick steel bars, and it was between the street door that led to the passage and the shop, and the shop door itself. A clerk assured him that Mr. Salmonson would be glad to see him.

Mannering was already prejudiced against Mr. William Salmonson, which perhaps explained why he disliked the man on sight. He distrusted his pale grey eyes, his square mouth and his square chin, as well as his ingratiating manner. He was obviously not a born Englishman, and Mannering imagined one of his parents had been Swedish or Danish.

On the other hand Salmonson had no reason to be prejudiced against Mannering, and while he neither liked nor disliked the man standing before him, his first impressions were good. It was easy to imagine that this customer was wealthy. Mannering was dressed in a grey lounge suit impeccable as to cut, and Salmonson scented wealth.

Mannering lost no time in getting to the point.

"So what you are really after is really *unusual* jewellery," Salmonson said. "Well – yes, I *can* obtain it. But it costs a lot of

money, Mr. Mannering."

"I'm not worrying about price," Mannering said almost testily.

"I *see*. Then we can talk serious business, Mr. Mannering." Salmonson looked his caller up and down. "Some of the stones that pass through our hands are not for general sale. In fact there are many stones which their owners would hate to think were on the market. You probably know the custom as well as I do, my dear sir! So many of our great families have financial problems, and have to sell valuable heirlooms. They make paste replicas, which stay in their possession as the original. A harmless little deception."

"I know a little about the jewel business," Mannering told Salmonson. "Some stones like that are on the market, but seldom the best. It would be too dangerous for the owners. Have you met many collectors just wanting stones, who care nothing for history providing they get them? My own collection, for instance, is never on view, and collecting is my hobby. You follow me?"

"I certainly do, sir! Stones which are on the market and shouldn't be. I follow you." Salmonson was at once jubilant and wary. "It is dangerous to meddle with them, mind you."

"I was told you might be able to advise me of someone who would take the risk," Mannering said.

"Were you, indeed? By whom?"

"Does it matter?"

Salmonson's eyes changed colour to slate grey, as he shook his head.

"Very well, let us be frank, Mr. Mannering. You will have no objection to buying stolen stones, if I could tell you where to get them."

"You misunderstand me," said Mannering. "I should certainly not buy anything that I knew to be stolen, but I would be quite prepared to buy stones with their history unknown – to me. I would probably have difficulty, for instance, in recognising the Koh-i-nor, providing it was well cut. An extreme example, but you follow me?"

"I do indeed," enthused Salmonson. He did not doubt that a man of Mannering's reputation would be prepared to handle suspect gems, for he knew that the bigger collectors often cared nothing about right of ownership. Salmonson could have

supplied the police with a long list of names of people who bought stolen jewels, officially unaware of their origin. And Mannering, with his wealth, was a client in a thousand. “I can show you certain gems which might interest you, although I haven’t a great number. I can, however, recommend you to someone else who thinks a little less of his reputation than I do, Mr. Mannering. Frankly, I do not deal direct in matters like that. I am satisfied to take a very small commission for introducing business.”

“Will you show me what you have here? I’m not buying this morning, but I am coming into the market very soon.”

Salmonson stood up, smiling and showing his wide-spaced teeth.

“I understand, my dear sir! I will show you my own prize pieces with pleasure.”

Salmonson was smiling, and his hands were resting on his desk. Out of the corner of his eyes Mannering saw the man’s right hand move towards a small inkstand. A moment later there was a sharp hissing sound, and in front of Mannering’s eyes the wall on the right separated, showing a dark patch beyond. When he looked round Salmonson’s hand was well away from the desk.

“That’s very neat, Mr. Salmonson!”

“Isn’t it?” Salmonson purred. “It leads to my vault, and it is the one and only entrance. With people like the Baron we can’t be too careful. Just a moment, I’ll switch on the light.”

For the next half hour Mr. William Salmonson did most of the talking, while displaying his prize pieces. Mannering showed more than an intelligent appreciation, and an even deeper interest in two diamonds that Salmonson privately ear-marked as sold. But he took a detailed mental note of a small safe that Salmonson did not open, in one corner of the vault. That safe almost certainly contained the Diamond of Desire, and probably other jewels of equal value.

And now the Baron knew the only entrance to the vault.

Chapter Six

Messages And Action

It was just after one o'clock when Mannering left Salmonson's office. It was impossible to start work until the evening, and he had to be patient. He amused himself with an early evening paper's account of the Baron's latest robbery, finding more than a hint of sympathy with the cracksman. More than once, by a characteristic bold and generous gesture, the Baron had gained sympathy rather than opprobrium.

Lorna's train was not due at Dover until twelve-thirty, and there was hardly time for a message. He walked to his Club, the Barton in the Mall, and was in the middle of an excellent grill when he heard his name called. He looked up, to see the youthful figure of the man who had first started him on the chase for the five Jewels of Castilla.

Juan de Castilla was older than he seemed. He had been at Cambridge when John Mannering was up, and their friendship had lasted. De Castilla had all the flashing good looks of the *hidalgo,* and Mannering knew that when he had been driven out of Spain, with his father and sister, it had been a blow that would never be altogether healed unless there was a political upheaval. But he was outwardly as exuberant as ever he had been, and gripped Mannering's hand.

"Am I interfering, my friend, or may I join you?"

"I'm in no hurry, and I'm hungry," said Mannering. "I can recommend this extremely appetising grill."

"I have just half an hour," said de Castilla. "My tease of a sister has made me promise to go shopping with her this afternoon."

"I can't imagine a better way of spending an afternoon than with Anita," said Mannering. "How is she?"

"As restless and worried as ever." Juan de Castilla frowned, "It is a bad business, Mannering. Those jewels! How absurd that men and women should worry so much about little things. But

they are part of us, in our blood. We would rather have lost everything than those."

"Juan, did you see that Price was burgled last night?"

"Yes, yes, but it was not the Sea of Fire that was taken."

"According to the measurements Price gave the Press, it was the Sea of Fire," said Mannering.

Juan's expression changed, he looked appalled. Obviously he had had no idea that the robbery at Price's house had been *because* of the Sea of Fire.

He finished the lamb, new potatoes and *petits pois* too quickly, obviously upset. When Mannering went with him to the lounge, Anita de Castilla was waiting. She stood up quickly, a slim, lovely little creature dressed in black trimmed with red, with her flawless, creamy skin, dark eyes that could flash from anger or merriment, black hair that would never be properly controlled, and full, generous lips. She held Mannering's hand.

"It is John, what a pleasure to see you. How are you? You have been feeding Juan to make him as fat as you, yes?"

Mannering chuckled, Juan said: "Steady!" and Anita suddenly realised her *gaffe* and tumbled apology after apology.

Mannering felt cheerful when he watched them leave. Juan had been right when he had said that the Crown of Castilla was part of them. None of the family would rest happily unless the five stones were found. What he knew of the Isabella Diamond made it easy to understand. The gem had seen so many wars and so many adventures, had been part of the royal sceptre of the court of Spain in the days of the Armada. Isabella had threatened to sell it to enable Columbus to start his voyage of exploration.

There was history, romance, blood and fire in the five Jewels of Castilla. Mannering knew them all, and could understand the passionate desire to regain them.

That night, if the Baron's luck held, the Diamond of Desire would be in his possession. And if Granette was able to work quickly, Kelworthy's syndicate would have the Sea of Fire, and Panneraude's Crown of Castile. Mannering would have to fly that weekend to get the biggest of the stones from van Royten, in New York.

It was three o'clock when he reached Clarges Street, and saw a small Morris car parked some fifty yards from his flat. He also

saw the driver. It was a temptation to talk to the Yard man but the keen-eyed youngster who had lost him at Charing Cross would probably not appreciate it.

He opened the door of the flat, and kicked the telegraph envelope lying on the mat. News from Lorna already! He ripped it open and read the cryptic message quickly.

> OLL RETURNED LONDON GEE STAYING HOTEL RIVOL RUE DE RIVOLI OVERHEARD APPOINTMENT PIERRE PANNERAUDE TOMORROW MIDDAY L.

So Granette was going to see Panneraude, making an effort to buy the Crown of Castile before he attempted to steal it!

The pace was hot. He had to tackle Salmonson's place that night: in a little more than four hours.

Salmonson's shop and offices were on the comer of the junction of Hatton Garden and Liber Street. The bottom windows were barred and shuttered. The police patrolled that quarter of London more zealously than any other, most of the houses had armed guards inside, with burglar alarms rigged up to the last degree of ingeniousness. Mannering might know the way into Salmonson's vault, but he could not know what he was likely to meet as he went towards it.

He did not need to study the lock of Salmonson's door too well that night, for he had seen the type when he had called there in the morning. He knew that he needed the most powerful cutter made for the grill inside. There were plenty of such cutters, and the chief difficulty had been to get one to Hatton Garden without attracting the attention of the police.

Normally he would have started a town robbery after midnight, but his knowledge of the care with which Hatton Garden was watched stopped him. He knew, as no one else could, that the actual chances of success were a hundred to one against, and most men would have thought he was lengthening the odds during the early evening. He believed otherwise.

It was dark when he walked towards the corner from the Strand, carrying a small suitcase in his hands, and dressed in a ready-made lounge suit that changed his appearance remarkably. The few lines at his mouth, the darkening of his

skin, and rubber pads in his cheeks made him very different from John Mannering. A policeman could look at him for five minutes, face to face, and not recognise him as Mannering.

At eight o'clock, Hatton Garden and the precious stone market of London was only half-asleep. Several shops and offices were open, although the regular trading hours were past. Mannering, who had been in and out of the district a great deal as John Mannering, knew that artisans were cutting and polishing stones for prompt delivery, that he was passing stolen goods and legitimate ones, that behind most of the shutters armed guards were waiting.

But it would be some time before the police watch was concentrated for the night. Mannering passed a policeman, who seemed to size him up and pass him as presentable.

The lights were few and far between, excepting where they shone between the shop windows. Only a few people were passing to and fro, most of them from the buildings nearby. There was no regular thoroughfare, and Liber Street offered no short cut to anywhere in London. Few people were likely to use it.

The premises of Messrs. Salmonson & Grey, on the corner, had two separate entrances. One was to the shop, the other to the offices above. Mannering might have decided to pick the lock of the offices, but he believed there was only one entrance to Salmonson's room, and one way to the vault; through the shop itself. Despite the thick bars of the gate the front door was his safest bet, but the small porch by the office entrance in Liber Street would be useful for shelter.

Mannering reached the corner and turned it, without pausing in his stride but glancing sharply up and down the street. There was no one in sight but the policeman, whose back was turned towards him. The man was not due to pass this corner again for half an hour.

Mannering slipped into the porch and opened his case. His tools were in it, together with the blue mask and his gas-pistol. Except for the heavy steel cutter, he put everything in his pockets. He did not propose to put on the blue mask until he was inside.

He stepped to the corner again, with the cutter under his coat. It was as weighty as two jemmies tied together, and

shaped like a pair of pincers. The powerful maw could cut through inch thick steel in seconds, the leverage power of the tool was so great. Mannering had not believed what it could do until he had actually operated the tool. That maw could snap inch steel as easily as he could cut barbed wire with ordinary cutters, with even less effort.

He reached the corner from the shadows of the porch, his heart beating fast now, every sense alert. No one was in sight, and there were no lights within fifty feet of him. No one farther away than twenty yards could see him clearly.

The door of Salmonson & Grey's was locked for the night, and to the outward eye seemed impenetrable. Mannering was thinking about the chief obstacle, the iron-barred gate inside. The lock of this door should be child's play. As he began to work, the personality of the Baron gradually took over.

He used a pick-lock which was second nature now, but he hardly had it in the keyhole before he heard the sound of footsteps from somewhere close by.

The sound came without a moment's warning, right in his ears. He went rigid, then realised that someone was coming down the stairs of the premises next door, close enough to be dangerous and yet out of sight. He pushed the pick-lock into his pocket and stepped to the edge of the pavement. The footsteps sounded, sharp and incisive.

A glance over his shoulder showed the Baron that the door looked normal enough. No one could know that a pick-lock had been in it a few seconds before. He took a cigarette from his pocket, and stood lounging on the corner. A moment later a short, dry-faced man with side-whiskers came out of the next-door building.

He looked sharply, almost suspiciously at Mannering, never dreaming how the lounger's heart was thumping, and then turned right, away from Liber Street. Mannering watched him out of his sight, his pulse steadying, but still on edge. The suddenness of those footsteps had jolted him badly.

The man with the side-whiskers had not locked his door, which suggested there was someone else to follow. To Mannering the waiting seemed interminable. He was tempted to try again when suddenly he heard the sound of heavier footsteps. He went round the corner this time, still able to hear

the second man coming downstairs. The key of the door was turned, and he knew the place was shut up for the night.

He slipped into the shadows of the doorway where he had left his case. A moment later the fellow passed him, without suspecting his presence. Mannering watched the second man disappear before slipping to the corner again.

Five precious minutes had gone, but there was no one else in sight and the first door would soon be open. He pushed the pick-lock in with steady fingers. Suddenly there was a sharp click! and the Baron stood there, with the door swinging open. Ahead of him, across the passage, was the barred gate he had seen that afternoon.

The streets were empty, although from a distant room came the sound of a man's voice, bawling *Yeah, yeah, yeah* with a drunken gaiety. Mannering cursed the singer, for he was straining his ears to catch the slightest sound of approach.

Now was the testing time for the cutters.

The darkness was complete, but he flashed his lamp to make sure of his position. Then he took the cutters from under his coat, and put the maw about one of the inch thick iron bars. He levered the handles slowly, feeling the sudden pressure as the jaws began to bite through the steel. Almost before he realised it had happened the two jaws met together with a faint click.

The first bar was in two parts!

Mannering was breathing hard as he started on the second bar, but it was as easy as the first. In less than three minutes the lock had been cut away from the grille-gates, and he pushed it slowly.

He pushed it wider, stepped across the threshold, into the small shop, and turned to pull the grille behind him. He worked very fast, following a preconceived plan without a pause. He ran two pieces of sticking plaster on the door edge and the framework, making sure the door would not open accidentally with a rush of wind. The silence was profound, not even the voice of the singer penetrated into the shop.

The Baron slipped inside, closing the shop door behind him without locking it. His mind felt very clear. Salmonson's office was on the ground floor, just behind the workroom, and he knew just which door he had to pass through. He did not use a light, except one flash from his torch to show the direction.

The door leading from the shop to the passage beyond was locked, but Mannering made a quick job of it with the pick-lock. Then he stood in the passage, in utter darkness, hardly breathing. One more door and he was in Salmonson's room, the way to the vault was open.

He slipped the blue handkerchief over his chin, and stepped to Salmonson's door. With the shop door closed, no one could possibly see him from outside, but Mannering worked with the light of his torch all the time, deciding not to switch on the electric light.

The lock was a perfect example of the locksmith's art. No pick-lock in the world could open it, but the Baron had seen the type when he had visited Salmonson, and had known how to prepare. He had two well greased keys, made for similar locks, among his tools. He pushed them into the double-locks, after dusting them with a fine white powder. When he withdrew them, making no sound at all, the edges where the locks had come up against the keys and prevented them from turning showed clearly in the light of his torch.

Time was flying, but he had to be patient. He used a sharp file, working on the edges steadily. In sixty seconds one key was altered enough to fit, in two minutes they were both effective. He turned them together without a sound.

The lock yielded, and the Baron pushed at the door. It opened, slowly at first, and he drew a sharp breath as he pushed it wider.

As he did so he was conscious of an odd uncertainty in his mind, something that should not have been present when his plans had prospered as they had.

He paused, his ears strained for the slightest alarm.

And then he realised there *was* a sound, a slight hissing he could not understand.

He caught the first whiff of a very sweet scent a second later, and then he knew what it was. As the door opened a gas cylinder was operated: the hissing sound was coming as the gas spread through the room! For a moment he was flabbergasted, and then his mind began to take in the situation. If Salmonson, the clever devil, was capable of that trick, what else might be waiting?

Chapter Seven

Salmonson's Vault

The knowledge that the room was filling with gas, and at that with his own weapon, ether-gas, seemed to numb the Baron as he stood against the open door, hearing that faint hissing sound and feeling the sweet odour in his nostrils. He was thinking fast as he held his breath, determined not to take in the gas a moment sooner than he had to.

The gas was coming slowly, and it would be some minutes before there was enough in the room to affect him. Salmonson would not expect anyone to hear the escape when the door opened, would rely on the marauder crossing the room and trying to open the vault, unaware of the danger until the fumes were thick enough to take effect. If the Baron could stop the escape of gas now, he would have Salmonson beaten.

Less than ten seconds passed from the moment when he had first heard the hissing, and the moment he started to move. He closed the door behind him, flashed his torch, and pressed down the electric switch. Light flooded the office. He narrowed his eyes against the glare as he looked up for the gas cylinder. He dared not breathe in, but his chest was tightening, and he knew that he would have to get relief very soon. He backed to the far corner of the room, and when at last he took a careful breath only the faintest scent came to his nostrils; the gas had no immediate effect.

He went forward again, towards the cylinder that fitted to the top of the door. The cleverness of it was worthy of any engineer, for the container was actually a pneumatic door-closer of the type fitted in every other office in London, and Mannering could see the whitish vapour coming from one end. He stood a chair by the door, and climbed on it.

As he neared the gas cylinder the smell was overpowering, and he would not have many seconds to work without losing consciousness, but the possibility of being beaten did not enter

his mind.

He took a piece of adhesive tape from the precious toolkit, and pressed it quickly on the small hole through which the gas was escaping.

The white vapour cleared sluggishly away. Mannering's eyes shone as he finished his job, pressing the tape on tightly all round the hole. Then he waited for a few seconds although his chest was fit to burst.

He saw the faint bulge coming in the centre of the plaster and he knew the pressure of the gas was strong enough to force its way through; he had to use more plaster. By the time he had finished his face was like a beetroot, but the cylinder was thickly covered with adhesive tape.

It was impossible to estimate how long he would have before the gas would find a way through, but he put that to the back of his mind, got down from the chair and away from the door, and gulped in great breaths. He felt his head swimming, for the gas had floated about the room now, and for a while he was hardly certain whether he could last out.

Every muscle in his body was rigid, as though he was preparing for a physical effort, his head was still swimming, there was a drumming in his ears. He was suddenly filled with alarm. He lurched towards the door, his eyes wide open, his legs weak beneath him. He had taken too many chances, he would never be able to get outside. He should have given it up when he had seen the risk.

He was steadying a little as he reached the door and opened it. He glanced up at the cylinder but the opening of the door did not disturb the plaster. Again he took in great gasps of clear air, and the swirling of his senses eased, his legs became steadier.

He switched off the light in Salmonson's office, glad of the darkness. In the passage the air was clear, and he decided to let some of the gas escape from the office before he ventured in again. Five precious minutes had passed when he went back.

The odour of ether-gas was still noticeable, but nothing like so strong, and the Baron knew that his effort had succeeded; the danger was no longer acute. He closed the door, glancing up at the cylinder. The slight bulge in the plaster seemed no bigger; no more gas would escape. The Baron was feeling almost light-headed as he stepped across to the desk and stretched his hand

towards the inkwell. Salmonson had given him a great deal more to think about than he had expected. No wonder the man did not employ a night-watchman!

There was little need for the Baron's mask. With the door closed, no one could see the light in the office. He ran his fingers about the inkstand, and then, so suddenly that he was startled for a moment, he heard the sliding of the door to the vault.

"Perfect," murmured the Baron aloud.

The vault was in darkness, a black void. The Baron waited until the door slid right back, and then stepped towards it, wondering what next Salmonson had in store for him. As he reached the vault opening, he realised that he had not underestimated the cunning of Mr. Salmonson.

For what he thought was the black void of the vault was a sheet of steel, painted a dull black. The Baron's fingers knocked against it sharply, and he drew back, surprised at the sudden pain and the fact that he touched anything but air.

Again he stood poised, staring ahead at another door, another barrier. Time seemed to stand still.

"He's certainly good," murmured the Baron at last, and the sound of his own voice gave him confidence. He looked at the edges of the sheet of steel, and he found what he was after. There was a small keyhole, although nothing else to suggest a lock. Salmonson obviously took this extra precaution when he was off the premises, and the steel had not been visible that morning because Salmonson had used the vault before Mannering's arrival.

The Baron took out his pick-lock, inserting it quickly, but no pick-lock would help him this time. It was far too complicated, and the key was probably one of the newest type, an expanding block, with the barrel little thicker than a darning needle. The barrel was pushed into the hole, and the top of the key pressed, so that the block itself expanded to fit inside the hole.

"And that means gelignite," said the Baron aloud. He had never encountered anything better guarded than Salmonson's vault, and success here would be an absolute triumph.

It was reasonably certain that the explosion of gelignite would not be heard outside, with all the doors closed. He went out into the shop to make sure every door was closed, re-

entered the office and pressed the adhesive tape more tightly, then took a small stick of gelignite from his pocket. It had a sixty-second fuse, and he had brought it for the safe inside. He had two other sticks, and he could well afford to use one.

He widened the keyhole with his file, pushed in as much of the gelignite stick as he could, and lit the fuse. Then he hurried out of the office, closing the door, and waited in the passage. The seconds ticked by interminably, until with a suddenness that surprised him the dull *boom!* came.

The sound was deafened by the closed office door, and he doubted whether anyone would be able to hear it outside. The only next-door premises had been locked, and it was safe to assume they were empty. But he waited for three minutes before going into the office again, and odd sounds, inevitable in the darkness, came to his ears, making his heart thump, stretching his nerves to a fever pitch. But no alarm was raised, and the Baron went in.

As he switched on the light he saw the steel door gaping at the lock, and he was smiling as he crossed the office. A single push was all he needed to open the door, and the light from the office showed him the stairs down which he had walked with Salmonson.

He found the light switch for the vault, and the click echoed loudly through the silence. The Baron paused on the top of the steps, and started down. The safe was just as he had seen it earlier in the day. He went down quickly now, ignoring the safes that Salmonson had opened, and making for the small one in the corner.

Gelignite was needed again, and time was pressing.

He lost no time trying the lock with his keys, pushed in the gelignite and repeated his previous manoeuvre, this time closing the electrically controlled door and waiting by the desk. The boom came only faintly; had he not been expecting it, he would probably not have heard the explosion; Salmonson's doors were nearly soundproof. In a tear of anxiety he released the sliding door again and went down the stairs.

The explosion had broken the electric lamp, and he had to use his torch. A glance showed that the safe was open! He pulled at the door, finding four small trays inside, and on each tray there were several black jewel cases.

He took the cases in his hands, carrying them in one heap to the office, where the light was better. Every moment was doubly precious now. Each case was locked, and he used a screwdriver to prize them open.

He worked methodically, taking the smaller cases first and examining the stones quickly. They glittered like fire beneath the brilliant light above Salmonson's desk, but the stone he was after was by itself in a small case, in all its lambent glory.

The Diamond of Desire!

Mannering took the rose-tinted gem in his fingers as he glanced at it, his lips and eyes showing his excitement. It was flawless, a stone from the olden days. Legend had it that it had been among the jewels Cortez had brought back with him after his war with Montezuma. The Diamond of Desire had been given to his wife by Montezuma, to break down her coldness, and dislike. Mannering recalled the tragic history of the unhappy Aztec King and other thoughts flitted through his mind as he put the stone aside and started on the remaining cases. How Cortez, neglected in his old age and desperate for recognition at the Spanish King's Court, had given the stone to Charles V, how its renown as a gem to inspire desire had spread, how men had fought for it, stolen it, shed blood over it, until at last it had come to rest in the Crown of Castilla.

Odd thoughts for a cracksman who was opening case after case and examining their contents as though they were his by right.

Suddenly his thoughts were jolted from the past to the present, for between two cases was a tiny sealed envelope. The Baron pushed the glittering array of stones away from him, and opened the envelope. He had had no idea what would be in it, but when he saw the list of names and addresses it contained his lips tightened. There were twenty-one, and every name was a woman's. Beside each was the name of a diamond brooch, a necklace, sometimes a tiara, with an amount in brackets after it. The smallest was for five thousand pounds.

The Baron sat still for perhaps ten seconds.

He knew what the list meant. It was Salmonson's record of his victims, the women Leverson had mentioned. The amount would represent the sum for which Salmonson would return the diamonds, the sum to buy his silence.

It was easy to imagine the agony of the women concerned, few daring to confess to their husbands or their family that the jewels had gone. Salmonson had talked to him glibly of paste gems to aid impoverished aristocracy; replicas of most of these would have to be worn on big occasions.

Mannering glanced at the list again, seeing several names that astonished him. The Duchess of Plazan headed the list, and Mannering had a mental image of the tall, stately woman, and Plazan himself, cold, hard, a stickler for propriety in every way. The Dowager Countess of Resmond was listed too.

The Baron still sat at Salmonson's desk, within thirty feet of Hatton Garden, his mind running round this development and without a thought of his own position.

Salmonson's business was dirtier even than Granette's, who was at least working against someone who had a reasonable chance of defending himself. The extent of the racket was startling, for the Duchess of Plazan's reputation was beyond reproach. Mannering wondered how much Salmonson was making out of this careful method of blackmailing. Judging from the figures, and the value of the stones in front of Mannering, he would laugh at thousands and talk mostly in tens of thousands.

The decision came to Mannering as he stood up, and he was smiling to himself again. He was surprised how often he laughed aloud, or smiled or frowned when he was working. It was a way of easing the inevitable loneliness of the night expeditions.

He was able to match up the gems with the names, and found that there were three over, apparently unconnected with the blackmailing, besides the Desire Diamond. He dropped them all into his pockets without troubling to keep them separate, for the descriptions were on the list and he would have no difficulty in linking them again – and returning them to their owners.

The three loose stones were worth ten or eleven thousand pounds, and they would make another profitable night's work. There was a joy in simply robbing Mr. William Salmonson, almost as great as the joy of defeating his cunningly contrived scheme of protection.

It was nearly half past eight when the Baron glanced at his watch. It was time to get out of the building before the

policeman's return.

There was no need to tidy up, and all he had to do now was to get out of the shop without being seen. He would open the street door and pull it to with a bang. It would seem natural enough if he were seen, although he wanted to get away unobserved. That would prevent the police from finding the exact time of the burglary.

He left the office without another glance at the vault, walked quickly along the passage, stuffing the envelope and the list of names into his pocket. He smiled at the now useless iron-grilled gate, opened the shop door, and reached that leading to the street. His hand was actually on the handle and he was pulling it open when he heard the key grating in the lock. *Someone was there*!

Alarm flooded Mannering's mind again for a second that seemed an age. He had been prepared for emergency outside, but to find the door opening while he was standing there was almost too much. He hesitated for a split second while the key was pushed into the lock; and then he heard an oath from outside.

Whoever was there had realised the lock had been forced. Mannering had no time to back away, but just time to slip the handkerchief from his neck to his chin and nose. Then the door opened, and *Salmonson* stood, like a graven image on the threshold, staring at him.

There was another man, too.

Mannering took them both in at a glance, seeing the stupefaction in Salmonson's blunt features and in the eyes of his thick-set, burly-looking companion. Then Salmonson's lips opened in a gasp, and the other swore while his right hand was clenched and ready for trouble.

All three of them were in full view of the street.

Chapter Eight

From The Baron

Thoughts flashed through the Baron's mind in a confused medley, while the man behind Salmonson still swore viciously, and Salmonson's right hand moved quickly towards his pocket. Never in his life had the Baron been so glad of his mask. As it was his voice came from his stomach.

"I shouldn't pull a gun, I've got one. Be quiet, or I'll use it!"

The gas-pistol was in the Baron's hand as the words came, Salmonson saw it first, and his right arm stopped moving, his expression of anger changed to fear. The Baron backed two paces along the hall, speaking as he moved.

"Come in, and back into the shop. Half a word and I'll shoot you both."

His voice was harsher than usual, and there was a note of savagery in it that would have scared bigger men than William Salmonson. The other was still muttering under his breath, but under the persuasion of the gun both of them obeyed the Baron.

Footsteps, slow and heavy, were sounding along the pavement.

"Pull that door to," ordered the Baron, and the burly man obeyed. Salmonson's eyes were narrowed, his lips were pressed tightly together. Mannering saw all the danger signs and knew the man would make his effort very soon. He followed them into the shop, relieved beyond measure when the door was shut.

It was dark, but he could make out the men clearly enough. He moved towards the light switch, Salmonson's grunt came very clearly, and he lashed at Mannering's knee. Mannering stepped back swiftly. The kick carried Salmonson off his balance and Mannering went forward and crashed his fist into the burly one's face – for he was the bigger threat. The man staggered back against a show case, and glass boomed and rattled. In the glare of the light Salmonson staggered forward, with his hands scraping the floor. Mannering waited: in the bright light his

hazel eyes seemed ablaze with fury.

"I'll teach yer not to try them tricks, yer bloody fools! What's *yer* name?"

He glared at Salmonson, but the fight had gone out of the man when he had hit the floor, and his lips were quivering.

"I—I'm Salmonson."

"So you're the boss of the outfit." He was making as sure as he could that Salmonson did not suspect that he was Mannering, and the harsh voice and the uncouth words rang truly enough. "Got a bit've a shock I reckon. *You*! Keep still!"

His gun swivelled round towards the burly man, who was probably in the late twenties, thick-set, ugly, and judging from his cauliflower ears, a boxer. Not a man to meet at close quarters, and the gas-pistol might be needed. Mannering preferred not to use it, for without it the only evidence of the Baron in the raid would be the blue mask, and Granette had already staked a claim to that.

"Be careful, Britten, be careful!" Salmonson's words came quickly, high-pitched and agonised. The Baron's eyes were dancing now, for the boxer raised his hands reluctantly towards the ceiling. He would have put up a fight, but Salmonson's order stopped him.

"You're a wise guy," grunted the Baron. "Pleased to know it, *Mister* Salmonson! Only you ain't so wise as some think. Left a nice little list o' names and addresses for me, didn't yer?"

He saw Salmonson's eyes widen, saw the merchant sway on his feet.

"No, no! I don't know what—"

"Bluffing don't suit you," said the Baron arbitrarily, "you was born to tell the truth." He laughed roughly at his own joke, but all the time he was desperately anxious to get away as soon as he had made sure there would be no immediate pursuit. More, he wanted to put the fear of death into William Salmonson. "Why, you louse, blackmailing women is about all you can manage. Understand. Blackmailin', I said! Know the stretch for that? A cove got ten years the other day for trying to squeeze five hundred, and I reckon you've touched for a cool hundred thousand. Take you all your life to work *that* off," added the Baron, suddenly revelling in Salmonson's fear and the part he was playing.

Britten spoke for the first time.

"Well, wot are yer going to do about it?"

"Were you in this?" flashed the Baron.

"Supposin' I was?"

Before Britten was prepared, the Baron's left fist caught him on the side of the jaw, sending him staggering. The Baron brought the butt of his pistol behind Britten's ear, and the boxer grunted, his eyes rolling. Mannering steadied him to the floor, and swung round on Salmonson.

He had never seen fear so naked in a man's eyes. Salmonson was staring at him, his eyes like saucers, his lips open and his wide-spaced teeth showing. His face was yellow-tinged, his knees were shaking as much as his hands.

The Baron stood over him, menacing, dangerous.

"You'll be lucky if I let you out alive," he snarled. "I've got that list and I've got the sparklers. I know what to do wiv' 'em, and they aren't safe with you. Try that game again and I'll get you. Understand?"

Salmonson cowered backwards.

"Ye–es, yes, I—"

"Well, just take care you don't forget." Mannering stretched his left hand out, catching Salmonson's shoulder. He spun the man round, dropped his gas-pistol into his pocket, and chopped a rabbit-punch to Salmonson's neck. Salmonson hardly grunted, and he was unconscious when Mannering laid him on the floor.

Mannering was anxious now. The policeman would be due back in less than five minutes and he might be early. Salmonson and Britten were safe enough for the time being, and Mannering turned back to the street door.

It was very dark in the street, only a few lamps breaking the gloom, but there was no sound of approaching footsteps. Mannering stepped boldly to the pavement, pulled the door to behind him and locked it with the key Salmonson had left behind. He slipped the key into his pocket and turned left, away from Liber Street. He had lost all his tools, but there was plenty in his pockets to buy a new set. His rubber-tipped gloves would prevent fingerprints being useful to the police.

He walked quickly as far as Trafalgar Square, passing a hundred people on the way, every one of whom knew of the Baron yet did not dream they had seen him. He hired a cab at

Waterloo knowing it was safe enough, and felt the heap of jewels in his pocket with intense satisfaction. At the terminus he booked for Barnes Common, and was lucky to find a train due to start. When he sank in the corner of a first-class carriage he felt that he could relax.

The second de Castilla jewel was his: now for the third.

At Clapham Junction, Mannering dropped the key out of the window. Then he settled down to working out a plan of campaign, for he saw that he had plenty to do. Salmonson's blackmail racket had proved a complication that he had hardly wanted, for there was more than enough to do with the five Castilla jewels.

But he had settled his plan when he reached Barnes Common Station, still in the disguise that had served him so well at Hatton Garden, still stooping a little. He was not a frequent traveller on the line, although he knew the way to the house of Mr. James L. Miller.

This was a large, terraced house in a road that backed on to the common, and the upper flat was let to a newly-married couple. Mannering, as Mr. James L. Miller, used only the bottom flat. He let himself in with his key, and called for his housekeeper.

The woman had no reason to be in, and she didn't answer.

Mannering went into a small room on the right of the hall, feeling free and reassured now after the earlier evening's tension. On a desk were several letters addressed to Mr. Miller, some circulars, and the packet he had sent on after visiting Kelworthy.

He smiled to himself as he washed and then carefully resumed the disguise, altering the lines at his mouth and filling his cheeks with the pads and covering his teeth with the rubber film. Even Lorna would have found it hard to recognise him.

18 Lanchester Street had been a haven for the past six months. Mannering had once used a house backing on Wimbledon Common, under the name of Mr. Mayle, but Bristow had ferreted him out. The day would probably come when Lanchester Street would be useless, but for the time being it was safe.

His housekeeper, a prim-faced, unbending woman of fifty-odd, believed that he was a travelling representative. Mannering

found her aloof, almost unfriendly, as though she suspected the worst from young middle-aged bachelors, but she was houseproud, civil and polite, and she could grill steaks to perfection.

The front door opened half an hour after he had arrived, and he went to the door of his study. Mrs. Hawkes, dressed in faded black, gave him a tight-lipped smile of welcome, her nearest approach to frivolity.

"Good evening, Mr. Miller. I didn't expect you."

"That's all right," said Mannering. "I didn't expect myself. I'll only be staying for a few hours, I needed the post." He waved to the desk, and smiled. "If you can find me a snack meal in an hour, I'd be glad."

"Very good, sir." She never departed from the formula.

Mannering put her out of his mind as he sat at his desk and emptied his pocket of the gems. They sparkled like living fire beneath the single electric lamp, and he felt the magic of their beauty – fascinating magic. But he had to resist it. He separated the three stones that Salmonson had come by honestly as far as he knew, and the Delawney sapphires, put these in a box and wrapped it up carefully in brown paper. He addressed it in block lettering to Mr. Richard Leverson, at 17 Wine Street, Aldgate, and then he turned his attention to the list of names and addresses, and the stones that Salmonson had taken from twenty-one foolish women. He took just under the hour to finish his task, and he was ready for the steak that Mrs. Hawkes must have had in the deep freeze.

The Duchess of Plazan had never been known to fail in any of the thousand and one obligations that her rank and position gave her. She was a magnificent-looking woman, retaining more than a hint of the beauty of her youth. Her Portland Square house ran without the slightest hitch, despite the testy, choleric nature of her husband and the boisterous behaviour of her children and then grandchildren.

No one could have dreamed that for nearly two years she had been in a state of mental anguish.

Her oldest daughter was married to a young politician, whose career would have been smashed by the slightest breath of scandal. Charlotte, Duchess of Plazan, had never dreamed of the

complications that would arise when she had learned that Mabel had been foolish enough to have an *affaire* with an attaché of the French Embassy, a gentleman who had left London a year before and was now in Saigon.

The upshot had been that Salmonson had taken the Duchess's necklace, the string which had been in the family of Plazan for three hundred years, and supplied a paste replica for use on great occasions. For keeping his knowledge secret, Salmonson had accepted a thousand pounds a year, making a firm offer for the return of the necklace on payment of twenty thousand pounds. Thirty years before the figures would not have worried Charlotte. Now it was difficult enough to keep the Huntingdon estate as well as the Portland Square house, and every extra hundred pounds was a strain on the exchequer.

If her husband learned of the affair, she knew that he would insist on charging Salmonson. That might ruin the jewel merchant, but it would also ruin Mabel and the promising career of Captain Ronald Aiding. Between them they had managed to pay Salmonson his thousand a year. The third payment was due in a few days and the Duchess was still unable to find the money. Mabel had gone to Cannes, with Ronald – nothing had been said that might arouse suspicions.

On the morning following the Baron's visit to Salmonson's office, the Duchess felt really unwell, and broke her rule of not breakfasting in bed. The post was brought up to her with the morning papers. She glanced at the headlines casually, and saw another mention of the Baron.

And then, just beneath it, the name Salmonson.

The maid who saw her propped against her pillows and reading the report of the Baron's latest robbery, had never seen her so interested in the papers. She heard the Duchess's sudden intake of breath, saw the pallor that spread slowly over her cheeks.

"Are you all right, your Grace?"

"Yes, yes, get along, Stevens! Get along!"

It was some time before Charlotte, Duchess of Plazan, was able to think of the post after Stevens had reluctantly left the room. She opened several letters, glanced at them listlessly and threw them aside. Then she saw the packet addressed in block lettering and marked heavily: '*Private, please.*'

She opened it, glancing at the Barnes postmark, thought again of the Baron's raid and wondered fearfully whether the Plazan necklace had been among his loot. Then the lid came off, with the cotton-wool, and she saw the necklace sparkling up at her, aflame in the morning sun. She could hardly breathe. She took it in fingers that trembled, and the glittering stones rested on her slender white hands. Then she saw the small label tied to the necklace.

With the compliments of the Baron.

Within an hour of the Duchess of Plazan's receipt of the necklace, twenty other women in the Mayfair or St. John's Wood neighbourhood received packages, and felt the same flood of relief.

At his Clarges Street flat, John Mannering had come from the Elan Hotel, where he had spent the night. He was preparing for the routine visit from Bristow, and feeling that if the Duchess could be foreman of a jury comprising the other twenty, he would cheerfully face any charge at the Old Bailey.

He was preparing not only for Bristow, but for a visit to Paris. There was still time to beat Granette to Panneraude's house, to get the Crown of Castile.

Chapter Nine

Mannering Bluffs

As far as Mannering had been able to judge, no one from Scotland Yard had been watching the Elan, although he had expected a call. The news of the robbery in Hatton Garden should have been out within an hour of the Baron's leave-taking from Salmonson, for neither of the men had been badly hurt.

He knew that he had no alibi, but none of the stones was in his possession, and he had left nothing in the way of a clue for Bristow to attribute the robbery to him. The success of his raid had increased his confidence, and he felt in his bones that nothing would go wrong.

About that time there was a change in the Baron that he hardly realised himself. He became bolder with the police and with others, although he left nothing to chance, and he thought and acted as though there was a special benevolence looking after him. It was the confidence that had started six months before, when he had helped Lord Fauntley to turn the tables on that fat rogue, Gus Teevens. That was when the Baron had first stopped working solely for himself, and began thinking as much, if not more, of others.

The Salmonson affair and the knowledge that twenty-one women were breathing more freely that morning seemed to justify everything he had done, killing any qualms of conscience.

He was more alert if anything, more ready with a quip or a laugh, but that did not stop him wondering where Bill Bristow was.

By ten o'clock he had not seen the Yard man, although he knew from the Press that Bristow had been at Salmonson's offices at ten o'clock on the previous night. The second Baron raid – for the papers still assumed that the Baron had raided Chenny Street – brought headlines in heavier type, and the story in more vivid language than ever. The narration of the attack on

Salmonson and his 'bodyguard' was written up in such a way that it was impossible to feel anything but admiration for the man who could overcome such odds.

The fact that the Baron had had the daring to raid Hatton Garden early in the evening, that he had broken through all the defences Salmonson had prepared – the *Daily Cry* took great pleasure in giving them, item by item – captured the public imagination.

Mannering guessed that the Press had some idea of Salmonson's method of making a living, and that the police were equally suspicious. That might explain the reason for Bristow's continued absence. He had always visited Mannering soon after a Baron haul, in the hope of catching him with the jewels in his possession, and he was a routine specialist.

Mannering finished breakfast, decided that he needed a training session, for there might be just as much need of physical fitness in Paris, and decided to walk down to Mendor's in Shaftesbury Avenue. That club of clubs was open, although only Willis, the physical instructor, was in the gymnasium itself. Willis, a big, red-faced Cockney with a positive love of John Mannering, beamed his welcome.

"Glad to see *you,* sir. 'Ow's it going these days?"

"I hope I'm fighting fit," said Mannering, his fingers on the handle of a changing-room door. "I'll give you five rounds, when you like."

"Not on me you won't," beamed Willis. "Three's my limit when you're about. Three wiv' pleasure."

Mannering changed into a singlet and slacks, spent five minutes on the wall bars and another five with the parallels before donning pillow-like gloves. In the light streaming through the windows the muscles on his back and shoulders rippled and gleamed, the white skin glowing with perfect good health. At thirty-seven, Mannering could give most men ten years his junior plenty to think about.

Willis was an old professional, with several championship belts in his bag and he was occasionally loaned as a sparring partner to the better class heavyweights. At the end of three rounds he was blowing hard.

"Pity you ain't a year or two younger, sir, you'd give some of them canvas-wipers something to think about. Ever thought of

taking up chin-cracking for a profession, Mr. Em?"

"Not yet," smiled Mannering. "I think I'll spend ten minutes with the foils. Keeping busy lately?"

Willis followed him into the fencing room, where Laporte – the Mendor Club instructor – stepped quickly across the room, his thin face agleam, to greet the Baron. They were shaking hands as Willis said: "Plenty o' work, sir. Here's your mask and jacket."

Mannering slipped on a padded jacket of Laporte's own design, examined the buttons of the foils, and fastened his glove while Willis slipped his mask over his head.

"As complicated as you like this morning," Mannering invited.

"I warn you, M'sieu, I am in good form."

"I won't even warn you," smiled Mannering. "Ready?"

Willis took it for granted and bellowed: "*On guard*!" The two foils crossed, and Laporte came in with a direct lunge that almost caught Mannering napping. But Mannering stepped to the left, Laporte was too far forward and off his balance; Mannering's foil pressed lightly against the other's chest.

"*Touché*!" yelled Willis, whose expressions would have appalled most fencing instructors.

Laporte came in again, more cautiously, and they lost themselves in the thrall of the play. Nothing Mannering did went wrong, and Laporte was breathing hard as the minutes passed. Steel flashed on steel, bewilderingly. Willis's big head was moving this way and that, real delight in his eyes, when suddenly Mannering found Laporte's hand, twisted, and sent the Frenchman's foil flying.

"Enough!" Laporte raised a hand in surrender, and lifted off his mask. Mannering was sweating when he lifted his own.

"You were certainly in form, M'sieu Mannering! You fence like the master."

Mannering felt almost smug as he went to the shower. He stripped, felt the cold water sting his back and chest, and was towelling vigorously when a shadow darkened the doorway of the bathrooms. He looked up, prepared to see Willis; instead, there was the trim figure of Chief Inspector Bristow.

Bristow had a superior smile that always suggested that he had a trick or two up his sleeve. Mannering slowed down with

the towel.

"Good morning, Bill, we're becoming good friends again. I didn't know you were a member here. Sluggish muscles?"

"I'm not a member, I came to see you," said Bristow, and his smile did not shift.

"It's good to know you're so informal. The large and small Bristows still keeping well?"

Bristow gave a wave of his hand. "I want to talk with you, seriously. And I'm in a hurry. Is it all right here?"

"Why didn't you bring a Black Maria?" asked the Baron. "Shut the door, light a cigarette, and get going. No, wait a minute, come into the changing-room." He was talking all the time as he left the shower, nodded to Laporte and Willis, who knew that Mannering and Bristow were old acquaintances, and locked the door of the small room.

Bristow thought that he had never seen the Baron's dark face so arresting, never seen the gleam so warm in those hazel eyes. He could understand it, for the affair at Hatton Garden had been beyond anything the Baron – or any other single cracksman – had ever dared to attempt. Bristow had to admit that the Baron stood shoulder high above the others in the game.

"Now what is it?" asked Mannering, beginning to dress. "Didn't I hear of trouble in Hatton Garden? I thought that place was impregnable, Bill; the Yard must be falling asleep."

"The Yard's all right," said Bristow with that same quiet, rather worrying confidence. A few months ago it would have unnerved the Baron, but now he took it without a flutter. "Mannering, we know you were at Salmonson's place last night —"

"Bill, I'm really tired of telling you I'm not the Baron."

"All right, all right," said Bristow. "Be quiet a minute. Did you find anything to suggest Salmonson was blackmailing anyone?"

The question came easily and smoothly, and it would have taken nine men in ten out of their stride. It made even Mannering's mind jerk, and he was glad that he had started to put on a shirt. As he drew it over his head he laughed.

"Getting smart, Bill?"

"We badly want Salmonson, and there must have been some loot in his safe to help us. We searched the place thoroughly, and I've never seen a man so scared, but we couldn't find a

thing. You must have taken it. If you can help us—"

"The Baron must, you mean," corrected Mannering. He was almost sorry that he could not do anything to help. "Why don't you try him, and stop asking me questions?"

"Mannering, do you know that certain Insurance Companies are offering a twenty-five thousand pound reward for the Baron?"

Mannering was in the middle of knotting a tie this time, and he pulled it too tight, grunted and loosened it. Bristow saw his eyes narrow, and knew the thrust had gone home.

"I doubt if anyone will earn it, but why tell me, Bill?"

"I thought you'd be interested," said Chief Inspector Bristow. Suddenly his voice hardened, and Mannering knew from past experience that the crux of the interview was coming. "Mannering, I want your movements last night explained in every detail, and I want it quickly."

Mannering finished his tie and picked up his coat, each move deliberate. He was smiling, and his voice had all the confidence in the world.

"I've stopped explaining my movements to you or any policeman. A joke's a joke, but you carry it too far. If you want to bring every paper down on your head and a dozen members of Parliament screeching, detain me for questioning. I'll tell the whole story, and I'll make life unpleasant for you. Plain speaking, but it's necessary. You haven't a thing on me. You haven't the slightest reason for demanding explanations."

It was getting under Bristow's skin.

"I've a lot of reasons, and—"

"You think you have," flashed Mannering. "Try and prove a single one, and see what happens. I'll raise the biggest brouhaha you've had for years."

Their eyes met, Bristow's grey and frosty, Mannering's hazel and smiling. Each understood what was passing through the other's mind, and Mannering knew he had judged the perfect moment for a showdown. Bristow did not make a comment. He turned from the room, and when he reached the far door, he heard Mannering calling for some coffee as though nothing had happened.

Mannering's body was tingling as he walked towards Piccadilly Circus twenty minutes later. He had taken a strong

line, and with luck it would deter Bristow. Now, he had work to do.

He went to a safe deposit, collected the Isabella Diamond, and then travelled by Underground to Aldgate, after dodging his keen-eyed young detective without much trouble. He walked about Aldgate Station and the High Street for five minutes, to make sure that no one else had him under surveillance, slipped into a cloakroom to don his lesser disguise, then hurried towards Wine Street. Flick Leverson's maid answered the door, and soon Mannering was sitting in that beautifully furnished room and refusing one of Leverson's Corona-coronas. The room was warm, for a fire was blazing in a brick fireplace, the flames leaping up the chimney.

"I haven't much time. Flick. Did you get my packet this morning?"

"Thank you, yes, an excellent haul, even for the Baron." Leverson's pale face showed his admiration. "So you managed to get Salmonson, and put the fear of God into him."

"You should have seen him," smiled Mannering. "And I've spoilt the blackmailing game. He had a list there with the gems and I returned them to their respective owners."

"You're a strange fellow," said Leverson. He sat over the fire, while Mannering pushed his chair back.

"I'm just a little mad," conceded Mannering. "Now to business. There are two stones I'm particularly anxious to hide away until I need them. They're not for sale. Here's one"—he took the Isabella from his waistcoat pocket and handed it to Leverson—"the other is the diamond in this morning's packet, about the size of this one."

Leverson took the Isabella in his one hand and nicked it along the table with his thumb – the habit that had given him his nickname.

"A wonderful stone." He looked as though he would like to ask questions, but restrained himself and took the other diamond from his desk drawer. "I'll look after them. Are the others for sale?"

"Yes. What offers?"

Leverson was the one fence in London who did not haggle, but stated a price and refused to go higher. Now he took the Delawney sapphires and the three smaller diamonds that had

come from Salmonson's safe, and nicked them one by one. After examining them for a few seconds, he did not hesitate.

"Eighteen thousand."

"Put it to James L. Miller's credit," said the Baron. "Perhaps you'll keep the sapphires by you for a while, they might come in useful."

"By all means."

"And they'll be safe enough here?" asked the Baron.

"You needn't worry," Leverson assured him. "I—what is it, Janet?"

He broke off as the maid tapped on the door, and Mannering glanced at her. She was a pretty little thing – Mannering had used the words about her a dozen times – and perhaps the most self-possessed girl of his acquaintance. Even now her blue eyes were calm, and her voice quite steady, although her words were devastating.

"I've been watching the street, sir. Mr. Bristow and Mr. Tring are coming along, and there are others with them. They'll be here any second now."

Chapter Ten

Raid!

Mannering was out of his chair in a flash, and Leverson almost as quickly. Janet was standing quietly by the door, probably calmer than Mannering at that moment, for the news had come with the harsh shock of surprise. Leverson spoke quickly.

"All right, Janet. Keep them waiting for at least two minutes, then ask them into the front room and tell them I'll come along."

"Very good, sir." Janet went along the hall, while Bristow's voice came thunderously, as though he intended to make sure that no one could fail to hear him. Mannering's smile was tense and worried. This meant that Bristow had had a man to trail him to Wine Street, a man he had missed. He recalled Bristow's frosty expression, at Mendor's. Was Bristow going to find a reason for detention, after all?

Leverson stepped towards the stairs.

"This way, Mannering, and don't worry. There's a back exit, but it may be watched if Bristow's brought a crowd."

"More than likely," said Mannering quietly. "Flick, I'm not landing you into trouble. Let me meet it myself."

Leverson laughed.

"My dear Mannering, I've been raided a dozen times this year and they've found nothing yet. They won't find the stones, I promise you, but it will be better if they don't see you. Bristow would see through that disguise, knowing your eyes." He was talking as he led the way up the stairs. They reached a small landing, where a bedroom door stood open, and Leverson entered. Through a tiny window looking over the backs of other houses and a hundred squalid yards, Mannering could see the neat garden of Leverson's house, and the passage that ran along the far end. For a moment he thought there was no one in sight, but suddenly he glimpsed a man's head, poking behind a small shed at the end of the garden.

“So they’re expecting you to go out that way,” remarked Leverson. “Well, there’s a loft and two or three other rooms, but if they’ve a warrant there isn’t much we can do to stop them finding you.”

Mannering shook his head slowly, sick at this unexpected danger. And then the idea flashed through his mind, bringing a gleam to his eyes.

“As a gentleman of leisure, Flick, have you any objection to knowing John Mannering?”

Leverson shook his head, while the second knock from outside reverberated through the small house, and Janet’s sharp footfalls echoed towards the front door.

“Then we’ll give Bristow the shock of his life,” said Mannering. “Go down and entertain them, I want three minutes in the bathroom. You’re sure it’s all right with you?”

“My dear man, it’s a touch of genius!”

“You’ll make me so big-headed that Bristow’ll find me easy,” said Mannering. He hurried towards the bathroom while Leverson went sedately down the stairs, and the sound of Bristow’s voice floated upwards.

“Is Mr. Leverson in or isn’t he?”

“Yes, sir, will you come this way? What name, please?”

“You know very well—” began Bristow. Then the bathroom door closed, and the Baron got busy, removing the rubber from his teeth and the pads from his cheeks, and washing the paint from his face. In less than five minutes he was John Mannering to the life. There was a swelling confidence in him, a fierce exhilaration. This might help more than anything else to make Bristow doubly careful.

But what would Leverson do with the jewels?

At that moment Janet was collecting the jewels from the drawer in Leverson’s desk, while Flick himself was shaking hands with Bristow, with the courtliness of a forgotten age and a confidence that puzzled the Chief Inspector. With Flick Leverson, as well as the Baron, Bristow felt that he was out of his depth.

For all her emotion, Janet might have been brushing crumbs from a tablecloth as she took an asbestos box from the drawer, slipped in the glittering gems, and locked it. She turned to the blazing fire, picked up a pair of tongs, and placed the box

carefully in the centre of the flames and coals. She stood up, then put two or three more lumps of coal on and regarded her handiwork without a smile. The burning coals hid the box completely.

Janet left the room without a change of expression. She could see the silhouettes of the two plain clothes men who were waiting on the doorstep – only Tring and Bristow had come in – and then Mannering came hurrying down the stairs.

"Good luck, sir," she whispered, and opened the door of the sitting-room to announce him.

Bristow was standing opposite Leverson, away from the fire blazing in that room as well as the other. Tring was standing stiffly in one corner, his right cheeks being toasted. They heard Mannering's name called, and Bristow literally gaped.

Mannering had never created a greater sensation. Sergeant Tanker Tring's unhappy face showed no expression at all, but he was standing as stiff as a poker. Mannering reached a chair.

"I thought I heard you, Bill; you must be following me round this morning. I didn't know you were a friend of Leverson."

Bristow had the same feeling now that had overtaken him a dozen times with Mannering, a feeling of frustration and hopelessness. How was it possible to catch such a man?

"A friend of Leverson," he repeated, then he took a stronger hold on himself. "Look here, Mannering, you're playing with fire. I—what's the matter with you?"

Leverson sneezed at the word 'fire'. Bristow glanced at him quickly and then looked away, acutely conscious of the fact that he had jumped at the sound of a sneeze. He felt more of a fool than he liked, and Tanker Tring was bemoaning to himself that Mannering alone was bad enough and Leverson alone a handful, but both together they were the worst proposition the Yard was ever likely to meet. Tanker preferred handling the tougher type of character.

Bristow tried the heavy hand.

"Mannering, you may not know that Leverson has only been out of prison a year, after serving a sentence for buying stolen jewels. You know what that means?"

"Who arrested him?" asked Mannering mildly.

"I did. What about it?"

"I'd say it was just another of your little mistakes, and the

judge and jury were convinced that you'd told the truth." Mannering's smile was full of mockery, and Leverson chuckled. "But you're not one to damn a man for one mistake, are you?"

Bristow fidgeted with his moustache and Leverson leaned forward and took cigarettes from a small table.

"I've information, Leverson, that you're holding stolen gems," Bristow said sharply. "I've a warrant to search the house."

"Again?" murmured Leverson. "Will you smoke?"

"No!" bellowed Bristow. "Tring, fetch Knoller and Dyson and start—"

"I'd like to see the warrant first," Leverson said.

Bristow showed it, as Tanker Tring went to the front door and admitted the waiting detectives. A moment later he led them into the sitting-room, and the search began. Mannering was outwardly calm. But his heart was thumping. He had no idea where the jewels were, and he could not imagine how Leverson had spirited them away. He watched the search, and when the police started on the other room he glanced across at Leverson, his brows drawn anxiously.

Leverson nodded slightly. Bristow caught their exchange of glances, tightened his lips and said nothing. He left them for a few minutes, but Mannering knew that he was watching through a crack in the door.

Mannering and Leverson talked of trifles as the search went on. Tring, probably the most accomplished searcher at the Yard, came downstairs to report that there was nothing to show.

Mannering and Leverson could hear them talking in the next room. The detective named Knoller was just outside, to make sure nothing was passed between the two men, or thrown out of the window.

Would they find the stones?

Bristow was saying: "They're here somewhere, I'll swear it. Mannering's just brought them to Leverson. I've suspected that's who fenced for him a long time. What room were they in before they went upstairs?"

So Tring had seen them leave the back room, Mannering thought. His lips tightened and there was perspiration on his forehead. The helplessness was getting on his nerves, getting him worried.

"This one," Tring said stolidly.

"Then we'll go through it again," decided Bristow.

Mannering could hear them pulling out drawers, heard the sound of a carpet being pulled up, the tapping on the boards and walls. Then there came a banging sound, as Bristow said: "Try the coal box, and see if the fireplace has any loose bricks."

"It's so blooming hot," complained Tring. A pause, and: "Nothing in there, that's for sure." His voice trailed off, and Mannering squashed the butt of a cigarette and lit another. Even Leverson seemed to be more on the alert now, as though the fireplace meant something. There was a tapping again, a poker on the bricks. Mannering doubted whether he had ever spent a worse ten minutes.

At last Bristow's footsteps sounded outside the door. He entered, red in the face, with Tring redder and sweating. There was a streak of coal dust on the sergeant's right cheek.

"We'll search you," Bristow said.

Leverson shrugged his shoulders and stood up. Bristow spent five minutes satisfying himself that the fence was carrying nothing, and then turned to Mannering.

"Well? Is it to be here, or at the station?"

The little pulse was ticking in Mannering's forehead, and his eyes were very hard, the mockery gone.

"At the station if anywhere, Bristow."

There was a silence that seemed electric. Bristow's eyes did not flicker, nor did Mannering's. The others played no part now, the duel was strictly between Mannering and the policeman.

Bristow weighed up the position quickly. If he took Mannering to the station and found nothing, Mannering would almost certainly carry out his threat of complaining of wrongful arrest and detention, and Bristow knew how the Press would leap at the chance of a sensation. The truth was, he dared not do it on the flimsy evidence he possessed.

He spoke very softly.

"All right, Mannering, but you'll regret this."

"Not so much as you will if you keep playing the fool," said Mannering. "I told you this morning that there are limits to patience."

There was unveiled hostility in his eyes as well as in Bristow's. They had been friends in the past, and Bristow was acutely aware that Mannering had once literally saved his life.

But time dimmed the memory of most things, and Bristow was desperately anxious to catch the Baron. His hostility was very clear, and Mannering knew that from that moment the relationship between him and Bristow was on a different footing.

"All right," Bristow said. "You are lucky this time, Leverson."

Soon all four men were out of the house. Before long the detective at the end of the garden had been moved, and in fifteen minutes Janet came back from a visit to the shops in the High Street, to report that only one policeman was watching the end of the road, obviously to follow Mannering.

"That's good," Leverson said, and he smiled at Mannering. "All right, Janet, thank you. Care for lunch, Mannering?"

"I think it deserves a celebration of sorts," said Mannering, his spirits soaring. "But how the devil *did* you do it?"

"I'll show you," said Leverson.

Janet went to the kitchen, while Mannering followed Leverson into the back room, and watched the fence pick up the coal tongs. Damn it, wasn't the room hot enough?

Then he saw the red-hot asbestos box lifted from the burning coals. He stared, speechless, while Leverson rested it on the hearthbricks, and slipped the catch with the poker. The heat from the glowing asbestos seared Mannering's face, but he was filled with admiration when Leverson lifted the lid, and the glittering collection inside scintillated up.

Leverson laughed, and shut the box.

"One of several methods, Mannering, and probably the best. I promise you Bristow will never find anything here. The only time they held me, as you know, I was walking along the High Street with the stuff in my pockets, and someone shopped me. That someone"—Leverson's eyes met Mannering's gravely —"was never really identified, but I have an idea that his name was Kelworthy."

Mannering hardly knew why the name came as such a shock. He realised that in the past twenty-four hours he had been so busy with Salmonson that the part Kelworthy and Granette were playing in this affair had faded. Now he caught a sudden vision of Kelworthy's scraggy face and figure, Granette's dark, bright-eyed good looks, and Olling's florid face.

"He'll probably regret it very soon," he said. Then he

explained the reason for the trouble with the Kelworthy syndicate. Leverson warned him again to be careful of Granette. Then: "I've a really good sherry, Mannering, that you must try. Let's forget business and become gourmets. Among other things, Janet is as good as a Cordon bleu."

"Did she put the stones in the fire?"

"Yes."

"I don't know whether to congratulate you or say you're lucky."

"Congratulate me," said Leverson. "I helped her mother some years back, when the father was inside. Janet is not the type to forget. Apart from her work here, she is fanatically honest, and I pay her enough to make sure her father needn't go back to Parkhurst. Gratitude's a queer thing, Mannering, but when it's real it's the strongest bond of any."

Mannering looked with new interest at Janet, cool, clean, completely self-possessed. There was a fine irony in the thought of her keeping a would-be criminal father on the proceeds of her work with Leverson, who was a law-breaker a dozen times as dangerous to the police as ever the father could be.

The lunch was perfect, a chicken roasted with a wine sauce and a sherry that was exactly right. Mannering left Leverson's house almost reluctantly, sure that the two Castilla jewels were quite safe, and realising that although he had given a great deal away in this affair, he had made a net profit of over eighteen thousand pounds.

"Give and ye shall receive," murmured Mannering to himself. Then he wondered what had prompted him to ask Leverson to keep the Delawney sapphires at hand.

Knoller, the detective who followed him, wondered why he was smiling, and conscientiously reported it to Bristow when he was relieved by Dyson. Mannering did not try to hide, but went into a Keith Prowse office and booked a passage on an evening flight to Paris. He had still several hours on his hands, and he went back to his flat, prepared for an afternoon of ease. He did not get it.

He started with surprise at sight of Juan de Castilla standing outside his flat door. The Spaniard's face was set, his eyes were flashing, his hands were clenched.

"Ah! John. Thank heavens to see you!"

“What’s the trouble?” Mannering asked. The cooler he was, the cooler Juan de Castilla would be.

“Trouble!” exclaimed de Castilla as they entered the flat. “John, you remember telling me of Archibald Price, and the Sea of Fire robbery? Now Salmonson, who had the Desire Diamond, has been robbed. Both by the Baron! You understand?”

“I’ve been wondering whether it’s a coincidence,” admitted the Baron.

“It’s too much for coincidence!” cried de Castilla excitedly. “But that is no excuse for Anita, no excuse at all.”

Mannering’s hands stopped moving, and his body was rigid as he stared at the Spaniard.

“What’s Anita been up to?”

“She has gone mad, mad!” exclaimed de Castilla. “This morning she has flown to Paris, to see Panneraude about the Crown of Castile. With some fool of a man who told her he would help – to *steal* it if necessary. You understand, John, she says if others can steal the jewels, *she* can. She is mad, quite mad about this; those jewels mean more to her than to any of us. In a moment of excitement she confided in me, but I dare not tell Don Manuel, and I can do nothing to stop her. Is it possible, John, that you can persuade her it is madness?”

Chapter Eleven

Mannering Moves Fast

When Mannering had first contemplated the task of getting the five Jewels of Castilla it had seemed quite straightforward. A series of five burglaries would carry less danger than usual because only the Kelworthy syndicate knew of their connection.

But from the moment that he had discovered the ruthlessness of Granette, even to impersonation, he had faced complications – but none so alarming as Anita de Castilla playing with a mad notion like this, actually in Paris with a fool who had promised to help her break into Panneraude's place should the Frenchman refuse to sell the Crown! For a few seconds Mannering could only stand and stare at Juan, who was waiting as though for the oracle to speak. De Castilla had always looked on Mannering as a man who could work miracles.

Mannering's tension lessened, more for the other's sake than because he felt easier in his mind.

"My God, Juan, this is the most spirited thing I've heard."

"Spirited!" choked Juan. "Spirited, when she will probably be in a French prison before the night is out; she has some idiot infatuated with her, men are always so ready to die for Anita. John, I'm sorry I had to come to you, but we have so few friends in England, and Don Manuel just is not well enough to stand the shock. I dare not tell him."

"Take it easy," said Mannering, across the spate of words. He stepped to the sideboard and poured a finger of whisky, for Juan was labouring under a greater nervous strain than he had realised. "There's no hurry. We can't – or I can't – get to Paris any sooner than my evening flight. If we charter a special it will make only a couple of hours' difference. Sit down, and tell me all about it."

Juan stood with his whisky in his hand, a tense smile on his face and beads of perspiration on his forehead.

"*You* will go to Paris! John, I am tremendously obliged; I had

hoped, yet hardly dared to suggest. Anita, she is a fool, but she will do most things for you. I think sometimes she is jealous of Lorna!"

Juan sat down abruptly, and took a sip of the whisky. He laughed a little awkwardly.

"I'm afraid I must have seemed an awful fool, John." All his anxiety had gone, and he was in complete control of himself. "The only thing I could think of was rushing to you."

Mannering laughed.

"There are worse ports in a storm, and I know Anita has a soft spot for me. Are you sure she wasn't simply talking?"

"Absolutely positive! She's had something on her mind for several days; I have sensed it. I know Anita," added Juan with brotherly assurance. "And this fellow who she has been seeing secretly—"

"Do you know him?"

"I can tell you his name, but she has not introduced me," said de Castilla. "She has been carrying on as though it's a love affair, but I suspected there was something else. I tried to make her talk, but she would not listen, until this morning while she was dressing and got ready to go to London airport."

"Didn't you try to stop her?"

"Of course! I raced to the airport and reached there before any flight to Paris left. But—she was gone."

"Gone?" Mannering was startled. "How could she manage it?"

"Obviously, a special plane," said de Castilla. "I inquired of the officials. Yes, there was a special charter plane, with a lady and gentleman; the description was Anita's. You see, she was taking no chances."

"Ye–es," said Mannering, pushing his hand through his hair. He was thinking that the arrangements sounded far too thorough to be Anita's, and certainly seemed beyond the scheming of a love-sick swain. Juan was right, there were a dozen men in London who would have been prepared for any daring escapade for Anita's sake. She was the type to sweep a man off his feet, and old enough to use her sex appeal to get what she wanted. Mannering was fond of Anita, but he knew that in the affair of the five jewels she would be unscrupulous.

"Who is the man, Juan?"

"A man named Lenville, Edward Lenville. He has a flat in

Kensington, and—"

But the Baron stopped him quickly.

"Lenville! A broad-shouldered youngster, no more than twenty-five or six, with very fair hair?"

"The very man!" exclaimed de Castilla. "John, you are getting second sight."

"You're fated to interrupt today," said Mannering, but he was speaking more for the sake of saying something, and thinking fast. "I know Ted Lenville. His father was one of the bigger gem collectors, until his death, and young Lenville's been running through the money like wildfire. I thought he'd straightened up and was off the bottle."

"I'd say he was sober enough," said de Castilla, and he wondered why the Baron laughed.

"I daresay he is! But Lenville still has his father's jewel collection, or part of it. I'm wondering whether he's heard anything about your five jewels."

De Castilla sat bolt upright in his chair.

"*Sapristi*! Then *he* is after the jewels, *he* is the man who has had all the others stolen? He is tricking Anita, making the fool of her? John, I cannot—"

"Steady on," said Mannering. "You're going too fast. But Lenville is in jewels. I think I'd better have a charter plane after all." He moved across the room and lifted the telephone, talking all the time. "I'd better go over alone, Juan; you'll be more useful over here. If Anita sees you it will put her back up, anyhow. I wish I knew Lenville well, but—hallo? Mr. Morrison, please." He glanced at de Castilla. "Morrison's the man who will really get me service—hallo? Bob, John Mannering here. Thanks, I'm fine and I hope you are, and I'd like a small plane with a pilot for a rush trip to Paris. Can you have it ready in an hour and a half? Good man, goodbye."

As he replaced the receiver, de Castilla jumped up.

"It really is good of you, John."

"I'd rather not see Anita behind bars, it's not as though it's for you," Mannering said drily. Juan frowned; then laughed.

"You Englishmen! How you hate any show of emotion. I wonder how you can ever say thanks to anyone for anything. Exactly what will you do?"

"Did Anita say where she was staying?"

"No, but we usually stay at the Rivol, and she—"

"The Rivol!" exclaimed Mannering. He remembered Lorna's telegram, and the information that Granette was staying there. "I know the hotel well."

Happily de Castilla was far too engrossed in his own problem to realise that Mannering had been startled by his thoughts.

"Let's hope she's there," Mannering went on. "In any case I'll find her if I have to get the Sûreté to call all the hotels."

"I could do that from here," de Castilla said eagerly.

"It might take some time, but try it," agreed Mannering. "You'd better start with the Rivol, while I'm packing a bag."

"I certainly will!" exclaimed de Castilla.

Mannering was in the middle of packing when de Castilla burst into the bedroom, fifteen minutes later.

"Found her?" Mannering inquired.

"Yes, not at the Rivol, but at the Bristol, in Rue de L'Opera. Lenville is staying at the Rivol."

Mannering stared, and the seconds ticked by.

This time de Castilla realised there was something odd about Mannering's manner and the silence that followed. He broke off, while Mannering put a dress shirt carefully on the bed.

"So Lenville's staying at the Rivol."

"Yes, but John—"

"My thoughts are playing me tricks," said Mannering. "I'm more worried about this business than I'll admit."

Lenville, the son of a friend of Lord Fauntley – a friend, of course, because of a mutual interest in precious stones – had offered to help Anita de Castilla rob Panneraude of the Crown of Castile. For the average young Englishman, even if he had sown wild oats when he had come into money, that was remarkable.

But it was strange that he should also be at the hotel where Jules Granette was staying.

Mannering tried to convince himself that the idea in his mind was too fantastic. If Ted Lenville was in love with Anita, it was reasonable to assume that he would offer to do anything if he could persuade Anita to marry him. He did not know Lenville well, but had heard of his reputation as a daredevil; and he knew also that Lenville was a record-holder at Brands Hatch.

A young daredevil then, with money to burn, might well see

this as a glorious spree, not having the sense to realise the inevitable disaster if he failed, or to count the odds against him. On the other hand Lenville was interested in precious stones. Was it possible that he and Granette were known to each other? He frowned, wondering how he could get rid of de Castilla for a while.

"Juan, damn it, I'm practically out of cigarettes. Will you slip to Piccadilly – it won't take you five minutes – and get me a hundred Virginia 3's? Bring a cab back, and we can get to the airport right away."

"A pleasure!" de Castilla jumped up before Mannering could hand him a coin for the cigarettes, and oblivious of a full packet of fifty lying on Mannering's suitcase. The door closed as Mannering lifted the receiver and dialled a Holborn number.

After some delay he was talking to a Mr. Toby Plender, a solicitor in Chancery Lane. Plender had been at Cambridge with Mannering, and at the same school before that, and Plender had once tried to stop Mannering from making a heavy money loss. Plender had never borne malice because his advice had not been followed. His dry voice came over the wires.

"Hello, John, I'd been thinking you were dead these days, we never see anything of you. What do you want? Money?"

"No, thanks," said Mannering, "I like my money clean. Let me see if I can make a solicitor break his vows of silence. Don't you handle young Lenville's affairs?"

Plender's voice took on a more distant note.

"Yes. What there is left of them. He's thrown most of his money away, and what little he didn't throw, ran. I don't think that's breaking a confidence, a dozen people know. Why?"

That little pulse was beating in Mannering's forehead. Lenville was not a rich young fool with money to burn.

"He's interested in a girl friend of mine," Mannering said.

"If she's the type to hold him she would do him the world of good," Plender said. "He's an attractive beggar, but he's mixed with a bad crowd. Like you did a few years back! But he hasn't your luck."

"You never know," said Mannering with a chuckle. "Thanks, Toby. The information is for me alone, of course. I'll let the young miss work out her own fate."

"When are you coming to dinner?" asked Plender.

"When I come back from Paris," said Mannering. "Give my love to Mary."

He put the telephone down, and stood aside, his lips puckered. The notion that Granette and Lenville were connected was no longer absurd. He was a young fool but a likeable one, mixing with bad company. Mannering found it hard to believe there could be worse company than Granette's. Mannering wished there was a way of finding whether Granette had been on Lenville's list of friends, but there was no time to spare, for the quicker he saw Anita the better it would be.

Juan was back by the time Mannering had finished packing. They had an hour to reach the airport, which gave them ample time. By five o'clock Mannering would be in Paris. Other things which he could not have imagined were happening while he was shaking hands with de Castilla, and stuffing cotton-wool into his ears before climbing into the cabin: he was always sensitive to the roar of the engines.

A neatly dressed man waiting by the aerodrome saw him approach, and watched him climb into the plane. A few seconds later he was at a telephone kiosk, calling Chief Inspector William Bristow.

"It's Walker here, sir. I've just seen Mannering board a privately chartered plane. I understand he is going to Paris, and his luggage is addressed to the Hotel Bristol."

At the other end of the wire Bristow's eyes gleamed. He was still feeling badly about his two interviews with Mannering. He thanked Walker, replaced the receiver, and took a sheet of paper. He spent some time wording the message, for he wanted to say a great deal without committing himself. It would have been easier to an English town, he had to be very careful with a message to the *Sûreté Nationale.*

Happily, thought Bristow, Georges Robierre, of the *Sûreté Nationale* was a good friend who would treat the information in confidence. Bristow finished at last, sat back and read it, then pressed a bell for a messenger.

The telegram read:

"Chief Inspector's Office,
Scotland Yard, London, W.1.

Message to Inspector Georges Robierre, *Sûrété Nationale,* Paris, France.

Information received that jewel thief known as the Baron recently operating in London has left England for Paris. Should necessity arise I have reason to believe Mr. John Mannering, who left London today for Paris, and has booked at the Hotel Bristol, might be in possession of certain information regarding the Baron's movements.

William A. Bristow, Chief Inspector."

Half an hour later, while Mannering was in the plane as it crossed French coastal waters, Inspecteur Georges Robierre received the message, uncoded it, read it several times and alternatively smiled and scowled.

He was a mercurial little man with a tremendous store of logic and understanding. He knew Bristow well, and often had reason to thank the Chief Inspector for information that led to arrest.

"So," he muttered, "M'sieu Mannering, *hein*? Now I wonder if Beel opines Mannering to be the Baron? Mannering, Mannering, I 'ave hear the name. *Nom de bon Dieu,* I 'ave hear the name so often! The gambler, the gentleman who cleans up the table at Monte Carlo not so many months ago. John Mannering, of course! Beel, it is absurd!"

Robierre stood up, took the telegram and re-read it, pacing the room and scratching the back of his neck. But his eyes were gleaming.

"*Parbleu*! It is so careful, but Beel is sure, *hein,* sure of eet. So, then, am I!" He stuffed the telegram in his pocket and stalked out of his office, calling for an *agent.* There was certainly no reason at all why John Mannering should not be followed.

Chapter Twelve

Anita Prepares

Anyone who could not understand the burning pride of Spain would have found it difficult to understand Anita de Castilla's motive when she talked of getting the Crown of Castile. She was convinced that someone was deliberately trying to get the five jewels, and believed that if others could do it, she could. In a moment that she had at first regretted, she confided as much to Mr. Edward Lenville.

She had not known Lenville for long, but he had proved amusing enough, while he had the rugged good looks that suited an Englishman and would have been an affront in a Spaniard. His fair hair, his half-nervous, awkward smile when he was with her, and his attitude of holding her while dancing as though he was afraid that she would break, alternately irritated and amused her. Had she been thinking less of the five jewels she would have thought more of Lenville. There were times when she felt that he was very weak; others when he seemed quite stony-willed.

That might have explained the fact that when – in a rage after learning of the Baron's robbery at Salmonson's house, and the stealing of a jewel that answered all the descriptions of the Desire Diamond – she talked of doing the same to Panneraude unless he would sell the stone, Lenville answered quickly, almost casually: "*I'll* get it for you, sweetheart."

Anita had stared at him, and then laughed.

"My poor Ted, how nice of you! But what a fool you are, it's impossible. It was just a ridiculous idea."

Lenville had pushed a hand through his hair,

"I'm not so sure it's impossible. I've often been to Panneraude's house, and I know his strong room as well as I used to know my father's." Lenville had spoken with more effort than Anita realised. She had seen nothing of the uncertainty in his eyes, the eyes of a man who was more than a little ashamed

of himself. “I think I could manage it if—if you really want it,” he ended lamely.

Anita’s gaze had searched every inch of his face before she answered.

“I—believe—you—would! Ted, we will go to Paris, we will fly tomorrow morning! I will talk to Panneraude, and if he will not sell—pah! He is obstinate, he deserves it, and it is my jewel, you understand that? I am not stealing, not like the Baron, and he—the dog! I could kill him, he has two of the jewels, perhaps more! Ted, you are serious?”

“I’ve never been more so,” Lenville had said, groping his way through the flood of words. “Don’t breathe a word, though, and we’ll get away in the morning.”

“You promise?”

“Absolutely! I’ll have to go off now, though, to make one or two preparations. Is it a bet?”

Lenville had seen her move suddenly, and felt her arms about him, the hot pressure of her lips, the seductive warmth of her body. Then Anita had opened the door of the apartment and pushed him out.

By the time he had reached the bottom of the lift Lenville had been very pale, a man who was labouring under a heavy burden.

He had been thinking of the Kelworthy syndicate.

The swine had forced him into a corner, one he could not escape without their help. Every day seemed to push him further into trouble. He had shuddered when he thought of the prospect if he tried to defy them. He would be in prison for years, his name would be disgraced. Now that he had sobered up from a year’s dissolution, he was conscious of the value and honour of his family’s name.

In dispassionate moments Lenville admitted to himself that he had been a fool and a rogue, that he had committed crimes enough to deserve a long sentence, and that but for Kelworthy’s interference, he would probably have been behind bars now. So far he owed his freedom to Kelworthy. But the man had pushed him into other crimes since, always using the threat of disclosure if he tried to back out.

When he had been told to make the acquaintance of Anita de Castilla it had not occurred to him that he would fall

desperately in love with her. Not a man who gave himself up to brooding easily, he had brooded more in the past three weeks than in the rest of his life put together. He was desperately afraid of what would happen if Anita ever discovered the truth, but that had to be risked.

One thing seemed certain: he might as well wish for the moon as for Anita de Castilla. Kelworthy had him in too tight a grip, and Lenville knew he had not the strength or the courage to face the alternatives. But now—

Kelworthy had told him to persuade Anita to talk of the five jewels, to find whether she suspected the motive in the Baron's robberies. And if possible he was to persuade her to try and interview Panneraude himself, and get the diamond. Kelworthy would never let him try to steal it, of course. Kelworthy—

On the day when the Baron was robbing Mr. William Salmonson, Lenville had reached the Hampstead house. He was shown into the room where Kelworthy, Olling and Granette had gathered on the previous night. Kelworthy was alone.

The crook was sitting back on the settee, and his voice was harsh and peremptory as he peered upwards. One bony knee was over the other, and his jacket was baggy about his body.

"Well, Lenville? What's happened?"

Lenville drew a deep breath, was tempted to take a chance, to throw caution to the winds, to defy Kelworthy and threaten to tell the police. But under Kelworthy's gaze the younger man's determination oozed away. His pale cheeks threw his glittering grey eyes into feverish relief.

"She'll try it," he said jerkily. "Flying tomorrow."

Kelworthy sat there as though he had not heard the words. Then he stood up slowly, and Lenville saw, like a thing in a dream, that his coat was hanging almost to his knees. Those yellow teeth were showing in a smile as he patted Lenville's shoulder.

"Excellent, my boy, excellent indeed. I shall give you a high recommendation, you have twisted that little girl round your finger nicely."

Kelworthy paused, peering down at the youngster. He suspected that Lenville was feeling more keenly about this affair than the others, and he believed that the de Castilla girl was the

explanation. But he was satisfied with the look of fear in the youngster's eyes.

"All right, don't crow about it. What do I do next?"

"Just be careful," said Kelworthy as though he was talking to a child. "And remember that life could be a lot more unpleasant for you, Teddy; much more unpleasant indeed."

Lenville flinched.

"Remember I should hate the girl to come to any harm, and if you – or anyone, my dear Teddy – were foolish enough to try to trick me, I should probably have to put her to a great deal of inconvenience. Yes, a great deal," added Kelworthy. Then suddenly his gentleness disappeared, for he knew from the way Lenville blanched that the threat had gone home. "Now, plans. Plans, my boy! I think, perhaps, that brother of hers might interfere, she takes him into her confidence a lot."

"She won't over this."

"Let me think for myself, thank you. We will charter a special plane, it is really safer, and no one can travel with you. Besides, she will think it a very fine gesture, my dear boy. You will stay at the Rivol, making her stay at the Bristol, we want no complications. Granette will give you instructions when you are in Paris. He, too, is at the Rivol. Now—"

Lenville seemed to go over the whole miserable business the next day, as he sat in the lounge of the Bristol, with Anita opposite him. She was in a furious temper about M'sieu Panneraude, and Lenville felt more gloomy than ever. He wanted desperately to help her, yet he was deceiving her with every word.

"The pig! To talk to me like that, is he a god?"

"He'll suffer for it," Lenville said quickly. "I know Panneraude's a bit of a devil, and—"

"A devil! He is just a big, gross, fat pig!" cried Anita. "It will serve him right when tonight you—"

"*Careful*!" warned Lenville. "You must be careful!"

Suddenly she smiled, and her hand rested on his.

"My dear Ted, I am so sorry, I am so forgetful. You cannot know how much this is to mean to me. But—will it be too dangerous?"

"I don't see why I can't get in as easily as anyone," said

Lenville. “I’ve told you I know Panneraude’s house inside out.”

Anita de Castilla would have hated to think it, but she was naïve enough not to realise that Lenville was talking too glibly about the burglary. He said that he would do it, and she looked on it as an accomplished fact. Her desire for the Castilla jewels was quite blinding. Juan was right when he said that she was mad about them, filled with a fanatical conviction that with the loss of the de Castilla Crown the family’s heritage and importance was lost also. The crown was an emblem.

Lenville sensed something of this mood as he sat watching, her breathtaking loveliness seeming more vivid than ever. He wished he knew what devilish trick Kelworthy was up to.

He stopped thinking of Kelworthy, and stared at Anita. She was sitting stiffly in her chair, her eyes wide open and with an expression that looked like fear; he could see her breast rising and falling quickly beneath her white, high-necked blouse. Lenville turned round quickly, as the deep voice of John Mannering sounded.

“Hallo, Anita, fancy finding you here! Hallo, Lenville!”

Lenville stood up, flushing. He had not expected to meet anyone they knew, and Mannering’s arrival was an acute disappointment. Obviously Anita knew him well: so did Lenville, by reputation, and Mannering was not the type of man in whom he wanted Anita to confide.

Anita covered her confusion with a smile as she jumped up.

“John, how you always turn up at the right moment. Ted and I, we were wondering what to do this evening. You of all people will know Paris. You will tell us?”

“I’ll certainly try,” said Mannering. “Are you both staying here? Or is Juan—?”

“No, I have come alone, and met Ted by accident,” lied Anita. The glance she flashed at Lenville told him that she did not propose to take Mannering into her confidence. Mannering was sitting down and beckoning a waiter. “And so—but, Ted, that friend you have to meet, at five o’clock is it not? Leave Mr. Mannering to amuse me, and you will be back—when?”

“Within the hour,” said Lenville. He was anxious to report to Granette, although he doubted whether there was any need to worry. Anita obviously wanted to spin some yarn to Mannering, and it was a wise move. He nodded to Mannering, and Anita

hurried with him towards the door, speaking quickly and in undertones.

"He must not know a word, you understand? He is a friend of Juan and my father. He might protest, he might say it is too dangerous."

"I won't talk, Anita, and I know you won't."

"*Sapristi*! I am the sphinx!" exclaimed Anita, and she pressed his arm.

Mannering was smoking. Anita could not fail to see how comforting he seemed, strong, handsome, capable. He would be more likely to rob Panneraude, that pig, than Ted. But he would not have the daring of the young. To Anita, at twenty-one, thirty-eight was a vast age.

She was half-afraid that Mannering was an emissary from Juan, but he said nothing beyond arranging to meet her in the bar at seven-thirty for cocktails before dinner. That suited her admirably. She would not have been so pleased had she seen him enter the foyer of the Hotel Rivol, five minutes after Ted Lenville had gone in, ask the hall porter for Lenville's room number, and go up to it. Lenville's room was next to Jules Granette's; the name card system in the hotel had told him that.

He could hear voices in Granette's room, so he tried Lenville's. The door was not locked, and he opened and closed it silently. There was a communicating door, and now he could hear Granette's suave voice very clearly.

"You have done well, my dear Lenville; try not to ruin it. Nothing will happen to the girl. She has done all she could with Panneraude, and failed."

"But how do I know you're telling the truth?" demanded Lenville.

"*Nom de Dieu*!" exclaimed Granette. "What a fool you are. I have told you already, two, three times. We wanted her to buy the stone, she would have been easier to rob than Panneraude. Instead, we shall have to try his strong room. Tomorrow night, Lenville. Leave her tonight sometime, return an hour later and say you have failed, that the guard is too strong. You will have her sympathy, and you stand to lose nothing."

"If I could believe you I'd feel better," said Lenville miserably. "All right, I'll do it, but if anything should happen to her I'll get you."

He has some guts after all, thought Mannering.

"Am I a fool to waste my time?" demanded Granette angrily. "Go to your room, and wait!"

Mannering slipped out of the room before Granette or Lenville opened the communicating door, and neither of them dreamed he had overheard them.

Nor did the Baron hear Lenville's exclamation as he reached the door. Lenville turned round, his sullen face animated for once, and Granette's sharp eyes were questioning.

"I meant to tell you, a friend of Anita's arrived at the Bristol tonight. It won't matter now, of course. A man named Mannering."

Lenville had never seen the man look so vicious or so malevolent. He flinched backwards, but Granette's eyes seemed to burn into him as he stood there with his fingers bunching, as though he wanted them about a man's throat. Slowly the Frenchman's tension eased although Lenville still felt alarmed – as well as puzzled.

Chapter Thirteen

Panneraude's House

"Where is Mannering staying, Lenville?" demanded Granette.

"At—at the Bristol, but—" Lenville faltered.

"Just behave exactly as I told you," ordered Granette softly. "Say nothing to Anita, nor to Mannering. I need not warn you." Granette was smiling again now, but there was a glitter in his eyes. "Behave very naturally, and remember that if you make any mistakes, it will be very unfortunate for you. Also remember that Mannering is dangerous. *Dangerous.* Be very careful indeed."

Lenville swallowed hard.

"I—I will, of course. But I thought that Mannering—"

"He is a meddlesome fool," said Granette. "A very lucky fool, Lenville, it would not be good for you to know what I know about him. Your information is very valuable. Go now, watch Mannering, make sure he and Anita have little opportunity to talk together. And do not so much as mention my name."

Lenville nodded and went out, standing for a moment and staring out of the windows overlooking the Tuileries Gardens, a mass of vari-coloured early tulips. But Lenville had no eyes for their beauty. He felt miserable and worried, sensible enough to realise that if Granette was nervous about Mannering, then Mannering was really dangerous. Lenville could not understand it, but the prospect of an evening spent with Anita and Mannering appalled him.

Jules Granette left the Hotel Rivol soon afterwards and made for the Bastille district. A little ferrety-faced Frenchman in a side street off the Rue de Charonne greeted him with a start of surprise, grimy hands raised upwards.

"*M'sieu Granette, je ne—*"

"It doesn't matter," said Granette brusquely. "Is Labolle here?"

The little man's eyes narrowed.

"Labolle! He is always here. You have work for him?"

"I have," said Granette. He was ushered into a tall, narrow, forbidding house, grimacing at the smell of garbage that rose towards him, heedless of the little Frenchwoman in a shapeless grey frock and a pair of backless slippers who peered up at him from the open front room.

He found Labolle on the second floor.

A broad-shouldered, narrow-hipped, bright-eyed man with a two-days' stubble on his chin and cheeks, Labolle had three distinctions that recommended him to Granette. He was the most expert safe-breaker in Paris. He was completely without physical fear. And he possessed a little toy, a thin-bladed, razor-sharp knife that he could use effectively without worrying whether it was for murder or wounding. He was the most feared man in the Bastille underworld.

Labolle was exactly the man Granette wanted for John Mannering. Labolle listened intently to Granette's proposition. Yes, perhaps. The price would be high, like the risk, but—

"Five thousand new francs," said Granette, and Labolle lifted his hands in a gesture of contempt.

"Five t'ousand! This is not a watch to be stolen, Granette. Feefty t'ousand an' you talk!"

Granette argued and haggled; bargaining was inevitable. Finally Labolle agreed on twenty thousand francs, and his long, nervous fingers closed about ten *mille* notes before he clinched the bargain.

Mannering had several things to do before he rejoined Anita at the Bristol. He slipped into a Bureau de Poste and sent a telegram to Juan, reading simply: "*All's well.*" If the old Don got hold of it by mistake it could do no harm to Anita.

Then he called one of the innumerable taxis, a Renault painted red and yellow, and told the driver in fluent French to drive to the Place de la Bastille. It was still light as the cab went recklessly along the boulevards and avenues, heedless of other traffic. The only time the driver stopped was at cross roads where a gendarme controlled the traffic, and his brake was off the moment, the whistle shrilled out for the line to move. The noise and confusion was of a different world from London.

The road surface along the Boulevard Beaumarchais was poor, but the Renault bumped over it without disturbing

Mannering.

As far as he could see he had a clear run at Panneraude's place tonight. Granette had said that he would not attempt to get the Crown until the following day, and there was no reason why Mannering should not be back in London with the jewel before Granette started.

He knew nothing of the talk Granette was having just then with the gentleman named Labolle, and he had no idea of the telegram in Inspecteur Georges Robierre's pocket. Nor did he realise that the big Peugeot behind him was being driven by an agent of the Sûrété, who was swearing that Mannering, whoever he was, was leading him a chase that M'sieu Robierre would like very much to learn.

Mannering had seen the black Peugeot several times, and as they neared the wide stretch of the Place de la Republique, passed the grey stone walls of the Military establishment, he wondered whether ii was accidental that the car had been on his heels all the way. He decided suddenly to try it out, and pulled open the glass window behind the driver.

"Pull up at a tobacconist," he ordered, and the bare-headed driver jammed on the brakes, shooting Mannering forward. Mannering smiled as he saw a tobacconist opposite them, in the Boulevard Beaumarchais, but he did not smile when he saw the black Peugeot pull up, twenty yards ahead. He bought cigarettes and went on again; the black car started at once.

"So Bristow's been busy," Mannering mused softly. "The Sûrété's been warned, unless it's one of Granette's men."

He saw the heavily-built man driving the car, a sharp-eyed man who glanced at the passing cab. Mannering made a mental note of the face, then gave a second order to the cabby.

"*Rue de Chemin, s'il vous plait.*"

The cabby nodded, knowing his fare was an Englishman and prepared to accept any contradictory order that came. The black Peugeot was held up in a stream of cars and could not make a turn. Mannering had ten francs ready, did not wait for change as he left the cab at the corner of the Rue de Chemin, making for a back seat in a garishly lighted café.

Hidden by the passing crowds and the men and women seated in front of him, he saw the black Peugeot plodding back, the heavy-jowled man looking glowering. Mannering walked

towards the Place de la Bastille, knowing one danger was past yet feeling the chill of apprehension.

It took only a few minutes to find the Rue de Platte, and he discovered the shop of M'sieu Grionde near the corner. He introduced himself as Miller. Grionde, a small, grey-haired, grey-bearded man, made it plain that a friend of Leverson's was a friend of his.

In twenty minutes Mannering had all the tools he needed, including a jemmy, gelignite and an electric torch, and he made his way back to the Bristol. He was on the alert for trouble, sensing uncertainty and danger.

One of the first men he saw, in the foyer, was the heavy-jowled Sûrété agent.

Mannering passed him without a sign of recognition, and the other played his part well, looking towards the door and past the Englishman. Any doubt the Baron had had of the other's connection with the Sûrété disappeared, for Granette would not have posted a man in the hotel lobby.

"Bristow's after blood, and the Sûrété will be only too pleased to catch the Baron. I'll have a job to dodge the man tonight, but it will have to be done." Soon, he was wondering if Anita was looking forward to Lenville's 'burglary', and what she would think if she had overheard him talking to Granette.

Ted Lenville played his part well that evening. Mannering spent most of the time until eleven o'clock with the couple, when Anita feigned a yawn, and declared she was tired out. Knowing she was anxious for Lenville to get off, Mannering promised to join her at lunch the next day.

She left with Lenville, who was broad-shouldered and flaxen-haired, while Anita was petite and raven-haired. Mannering followed them soon afterwards and made his way back to the Bristol. He was carrying his tools; the French police would not hesitate to search his room while he was out, but he wanted to try a simple trick with his watcher.

Again he walked past the man without a sign of recognition; again Robierre's agent looked past him. Mannering saw that the man was looking tired. He went upstairs, but returned within two minutes, and he knew that his ruse had succeeded.

The heavy-jowled man was out of sight, and Mannering knew he had slipped away for five minutes, confident that his quarry

was upstairs. Bristow, in London, could have warned Robierre that it was never safe to leave the Baron for five seconds; but Paris had not yet met the Baron.

They would have that pleasure soon.

Night had fallen over Paris as Mannering left the boulevard café, where he had been sitting for the past two hours, but there was nothing unusual in the sight of an Englishman about at that time. A crescent moon bathed the city with a translucent mellowing light. Mannering was in the Madelein Boulevard, and he walked briskly towards the Place de la Concorde. That wide stretch, teeming with traffic by day, was brilliantly lighted, but only an occasional cab moved swiftly and noisily about its roads. In the near distance the moon showed the giant skeleton outlines of the Eiffel Tower and the four towering landmarks of the Exhibition. Keeping to the north, Mannering went towards the Champs-Elysees for he knew exactly where Panneraude's house was situated. Above him the leaves of the plane trees rustled, soft and mysterious, in a light wind, and the moon cast shadows of the trees on the broad sidewalk, a dark massing of dancing silhouettes.

There was no sign at all of a trailer. Bristow, knowing nothing of the five jewels, could not have known the Baron was interested in Panneraude, and Mannering reasoned that the police were not likely to be watching the place.

The house was built on a corner site, with the Rue de Balzac striking from it to the right. A hundred yards along the Rue de Balzac were turnings to the right and the left: a further hundred yards took him to the Chateaubriand, and he knew that from there were a dozen avenues of escape.

Mannering had been to more than one of Panneraude's renowned cocktail parties, and knew the layout of the house well. He had talked occasionally of jewels with Panneraude, a big, spreading Frenchman who was a fanatic on diamonds: Mannering had seen his collection, and he had been startled by its variety.

There had been a time when the Baron would have planned the entry with a much bigger haul in mind than the theft of a single stone, but nothing seemed to matter but the Crown of Castile.

The strong room at Panneraude's house was different from

any other Mannering had visited: it was on the second floor. In some ways that was an advantage, for an intruder could not be seen from the ground level. More people walked about Paris late at night than in London, and the danger of being seen was greater.

Only a breath of wind blew, and the occasional hooting of a horn came clearly. Mannering was thankful for the moon, and for the tall planes that hid Panneraude's house from the Champs-Elysees and the Rue de Balzac. There was a side door to the gardens of the house and he used it, slipping through the shadows unobserved.

The gate closed softly behind him, and as it did so there was a subtle change in Mannering's manner. His eyes narrowed, his lips tightened, and yet smiled, and his expression grew tense, expectant.

The Baron was taking over …

He reached the walls of the house, still in the shadows that fell dark and hardly moving over a small window on the ground floor, near the hall. He had had no previous opportunity of examining it, but he had often contemplated the difficulty of opening those long, slatted shutters. He ran his fingers along the edges, finding plenty of room to insert a screwdriver. It would be easy unless the window was bolted. He found the latch with the steel, and eased it upwards.

There was a sharp *click!* as the catch went back, and the shutters sagged outwards. The Baron stood still, waiting for any sound of alarm. None came. He breathed more freely.

He slipped on his mask, hiding his nose, mouth and chin, as he examined the latch of the window. It was of the usual French type, opening inwards, and he could just see through a gap between the two sections.

The Baron inserted the screwdriver again, and the window catch lifted without a sound, even as it dropped back in its socket.

The window was unfastened!

He felt tense and expectant, a surge of excitement running through him.

"Take it easy," he murmured, but only the echoes of his whisper answered him. He slipped a narrow steel rule the whole length of the gap. As it reached the top he felt a slight jar; he

had found an alarm wire.

He pushed a thin-mawed pair of wire cutters, almost as flexible as the steel measure, slowly through the gap, then took the wire between the pincers and pressed. The wire snapped with hardly a sound, and he heard its ends dropping down either side of the window.

He worked fast now, pushing the windows back and climbing through. A thick carpet was under his feet as he touched the floor, there was little risk of making a noise. He climbed over the low sill, closing the windows and latching them, without locking the catch. The darkness was like a tomb, for the drawn blinds shut out the moon. He used his torch for the first time.

He was in the small library, and that told him the position of the stairs leading to the strong room. He stepped to the door, without needing his torch once he had found his position. His gloved hand touched the handle, probed the keyhole, and found the key in the lock on the far side.

The Baron took a piece of folded brown paper and a tube of secotine from his pocket, smearing secotine over most of the paper and pushing it underneath the door beneath the keyhole. Next he probed at the key again. It slid backwards without a sound, and he heard it drop dully to the floor of the passage. He pulled the paper back, shining his torch, and felt grim satisfaction when he saw the key, held fast by the secotine.

Using another piece of paper to prevent the secotine from sticking to his gloves, he took the key in his fingers. It was easy to manoeuvre it into the lock, and to turn it noiselessly.

The Baron opened the door slowly and stepped into the dark, silent passage. He pulled the door to, letting the lock click home, for a slight breeze might bang an open door and raise an alarm. Then he turned towards the wide staircase on his right for he knew that the strong room was at the head of the stairs.

There was the silence of death in Panneraude's house.

The thick carpets deadened every sound of his approach, and his dark clothes and blue mask and gloves merged with the gloom. No one could see or hear him, although the chances of anyone being near were remote. Panneraude had often talked as though he relied on his mechanical system of burglar alarms and the strength of the strong room to keep out intruders, and he was reputed to dislike night watchmen.

The Baron reached the landing, his eyes growing accustomed to the gloom. He could make out two pale marble statues on either side of the stair-head. Ahead were two passages, leading from the stairs at a right angle, and the corner of the wall that faced him was also the corner of the strong room.

Mannering had a plan of the layout of the first floor in his mind, and could almost 'see' the walls.

He took the left-hand passage, knowing the strong room door opened from it, his footsteps still muffled by the thick carpet. Two yards from the door, he stood still, and his heart seemed to turn over. Very slowly he put his hand to his pocket to grip his gas-pistol, for against the gloom ahead of him was the figure of a man – a man bending over the lock of the strong room door.

Chapter Fourteen

Open Sesame

It was obvious that the man by the strong room had no idea that the Baron was near him. Mannering could see a faint white blur almost level with the lock, and he realised that the man was wearing a mask from chin to nose. Mannering's thoughts were chaotic, but the most obvious possibility was that Granette had lied to Lenville, that the French member of the syndicate had started work.

Through the silence the Baron could hear the faint clicking as the other's tools twisted in the lock. The door would be open very soon. The Baron drew out his gas-pistol, without making a sound. His breathing was hardly audible, his eyes were narrow. Once the other man realised he was present – and the Baron knew from experience that working in the darkness and silence somehow enabled one to sense danger – he would have to work fast with his ether-gas.

The Baron was smiling at the irony of this situation. Of course, Panneraude's collection might have lured a third party, but the coincidence would surely be too great. He wondered which window the other had forced, then he heard the other breathing more heavily. The clicking at the door stopped.

The Baron, on tiptoe, took a half-step forward as the other straightened up. He could see the dark blue of an arm stretching towards the door.

His man pushed at it gently.

The Baron heard a second heavy breath, almost a sigh of satisfaction, and although he could see nothing he knew that the door was opening.

The shadowy figure moved forward into the strong room, but the Baron went after him quickly. He took the pressure of the door lightly on his fingers, hearing the soft shuffle of the other's footsteps across the floor as he did so.

He pushed gently on the door, and two things met his eyes in

a flash.

A beam of light was stabbing towards a big safe by the left-hand wall; and the man's silhouette was sharper against the dim glow.

It was not Granette.

The shoulders were too broad, sloping to very slim hips, and no trick of light could have explained away the dissimilarity. There *was* a third man after Panneraude's jewels.

The Baron entered the room stealthily, making no squeak on the polished parquet floor. With his right hand outstretched and holding the gas-pistol, he pushed at the heavy door with his left. As it closed, leaving no gap through which the light could be seen by anyone outside, he stood waiting.

His lips were curving with wry humour as he wondered what this man's reaction would be when he discovered he had company. Gradually, admiration filled the Baron's mind. He had seen the lock of the safe several times, and had been prepared to spend fifteen minutes in opening it. The man by the safe took five.

Again the Baron heard a sigh of satisfaction as the clicking of the tools stopped. The safe door was open! He took another step forward, but this time his foot squeaked a little on the parquet floor. He spoke suddenly in French, softly and gutturally.

"*Stop right there*!"

The words must have sent the other's heart rocketing. For a split second there was no move, the silence seemed deeper. Then the man turned about with a speed that startled the Baron, but did not make him lose his presence of mind.

"*Nom de Dieu*! *Je*—"

"And don't talk!" snapped the Baron, his gun glinting in the light from the other's torch. "Do as I tell you, or this will go off."

He could see the man clearly now, and respected the size of those shoulders. He could not see the expression on the face behind the mask, but he saw the convulsive movement of the other's right hand; this would be no walk-over. As the thought entered his head, the other leapt, heedless of the gun. He came straight at the Baron, who touched the trigger of the pistol.

Labolle's knife flashed, and missed Mannering's face by inches.

The Frenchman gasped, reared up, and reeled backwards as the gas caught him. Mannering made a quick move to stop him from falling heavily, but he was too late. The other cracksman went to the floor with a thud that seemed to shake the walls. The Baron bent over the man, and dragged him quickly away from the door of the safe, listening intently, for the alarm might start at any minute. He hardly thought of the simplicity of his task – no *open sesame* could have been easier – as he pulled the safe door wide. He would stop at the slightest sound from outside or below stairs, but he worked swiftly, confidently, while the chance was there.

He took the cases of gems and forced the locks with a screwdriver, then ran his eyes over the stones. Most of them were diamonds, Panneraude's speciality, their lambent fires sparkling beneath the light of the torch.

The Baron put them aside, one after the other, searching for the Crown. He knew that he would recognise it at once, but he was gnawing with impatience, for he wanted to be away with the jewel in his pocket and the danger behind him.

He had to force a dozen cases before finding his objective.

The Crown of Castile, resting against dark velvet, shone with a fiery splendour that almost took his breath away. He stared transfixed for a moment: then his lips curved and the tension relaxed, as he pocketed it quickly.

The raid was nearly over.

But to take only one stone would be to focus all the publicity and police investigation on it. He slipped half a dozen others into his pocket, and turned to the outstretched man on the floor, practically in one movement.

He had been prepared for the gas to put the other right out for ten minutes. Five had gone when he shone his torch into the heavy, ugly face of the French cracksman. Frowning, he pulled the eyelids back with his fingertips, and then he scowled.

The man would be unconscious for much longer than five minutes.

The other had burgled Panneraude's house, and must have known the consequences of discovery and capture; yet he could not have allowed for the Baron's presence, and there were things the Baron could not do. To leave the man here, a sitting bird for anyone who came, was one of them. But the prospect of

getting outside burdened by an unconscious man, was a grim one. All the same, he reached his decision quickly. The man's heavy shoulders suggested great weight, but he was shorter than the average and with surprisingly thin hips. Mannering hoisted him to his feet, bent down and slung him over his shoulder, fireman fashion. He was heavy, but not cumbersome.

The Baron left the strong room, closing the door behind him quietly. By the time he reached the head of the stairs the unconscious crook seemed twice as heavy, and Mannering supported him against the floor, to take the strain off his shoulders.

Still there was no sound, no suggestion that anyone had heard the noise. The Baron's smile was set behind his mask as he bent to take the strain again, and there was a buoyancy in his heart.

Then, with a suddenness that dazzled him, the lights of the landing and the hall came on!

Standing there half-blinded, with the burglar over his shoulders and his right hand tight about the gas-pistol, Mannering felt a sudden rush of fear. That had been no accident: someone had heard him.

If he could only see …

He narrowed his eyes against the glare, hearing and seeing nothing until the voice came from below stairs. It was the harsh voice of Pierre Panneraude, a big, top-heavy Parisian, whose short, waxed moustache seemed absurd on his round, flaccid face. Mannering saw him in a blur at first, shapeless and monstrous, but as his eyes grew more normal he saw the revolver in Panneraude's fat hand.

The collector was dressed in a drab dressing-gown flung over bright yellow pyjamas, and his sparse hair was ruffled to an absurd peak above his forehead. But he looked and sounded wide awake, speaking very deliberately in French.

"Drop that man, and put your hands up."

The Baron did not move, but stood there, his face expressionless behind his mask, his ears alert for the slightest other sound or threat of danger. Perhaps only Panneraude had been disturbed. As tension eased a little, Panneraude's voice came again, harsh and menacing.

"Obey me! Unless you do—" He motioned his gun, and the Baron believed he would shoot without a second warning. The

Baron drew a deep breath and bent forward, as though about to obey. But the idea was coursing through his mind even then, the one gamble that might yet save him.

He brought every muscle in his body to play as he straightened up. The unfortunate crook on his shoulders went hurtling over his head, towards Panneraude.

Panneraude saw his danger.

He bellowed at the top of his voice, the cry echoing about the hall and landing, and at the same moment he touched the trigger of his gun.

The report was like a thunder-clap. Mannering saw the flash of yellow flame and heard the dull thud as the bullet met the flying man's body; then the two crashed.

Panneraude went staggering backwards, the gun dropping from his fingers. Mannering saw them both thud to the floor, as he was going downwards.

He was halfway down the stairs when Panneraude reached his knees. The big man's eyes were glittering, but he was too winded by the impact to do much. The Baron's victim was lying very still and quiet on the carpeted floor. Mannering saw the ominous red on the man's chest, but could not be sure how serious the wound was.

He was sure that the rest of the household had been roused now. Excited voices, pitched on a higher key than usual, were getting rapidly nearer. A woman was shrieking: "*Sacré Dieu*!" at the top of her voice, time and time again, a man with a shrill falsetto was shouting at her to be quiet as he rushed down the upper flight of stairs.

All of this came to the Baron's ears as he reached Panneraude. The jewel-collector was still on his knees, but this was no moment for observing the Queensberry rules.

Mannering swung a savage right to Panneraude's jaw, all that was needed to send the man backwards.

There was no danger now from Panneraude, but were the others too many for him? The Baron was sweating, yet he felt very cold.

He swung round, the thudding of footsteps close behind him. He saw the man with the squeaky voice, a wispy fellow in a long nightgown. He leapt in, rapping a left to the man's stomach and bringing his face forward, the bright eyes suddenly wide

with fear. A touch of the gas-pistol trigger fired the second charge, and the man crumpled up.

At the head of the stairs the fat woman, her nightdress stretched taut over mighty breasts, stared downwards in terror. Mannering could see her quivering, her eyes dilating. He took two jumps towards the stairs. As he went the woman turned shrieking towards the passages above. From them came the sound of other men's voices, and the stamping of feet.

The Baron was more worried about the outside now.

He moved towards the front door, seeing that he could unchain and unlock it in a few seconds. His fingers were steady as he pulled the door open.

And then he stepped back, aghast.

Not a yard from him was a little *gendarme,* a white truncheon swinging, bright eyes ablaze.

"What is it, *M'sieu*? What is it?"

The Baron regained the control that he had almost lost. That urgent question saved him, for obviously the *gendarme* would not expect trouble from a man who opened the front door.

"A thief!" the Baron cried. "He ran upstairs, upstairs! You will be in time, the servants are after him!"

The *gendarme,* with no reason for doubt, rushed into the hall. Mannering clipped him sharply and precisely behind the ear as he passed. Another victim of the Baron's that night pitched forward on his face, thudding into Panneraude, while the Baron swung round towards the wounded thief.

The idea in his mind was madness, but there were times when the Baron was mad. After this shambles, anyone who was caught would have a crushing sentence; the man who had opened the safe for him deserved a better fate.

The crowd of servants were at the head of the stairs, but the gun in Mannering's hand held them back.

"Keep quiet!" He still spoke in fluent French. "If anyone moves, I'll shoot to kill."

No one knew that only one charge of gas was in the pistol and that was useless at a distance of more than three or four feet. Still training it on them, Mannering bent down. He managed to lift the Frenchman to his shoulder with one arm, straightened up, swore at the servants, then took the only chance. But the odds were heavily against him.

He swung round, disregarding the possibility that any of the servants carried guns, and dashed for the front door. Only the light of the moon, lovely and translucent over the Champs-Elysees was ahead, so no one else had been disturbed. The grounds outside were extensive, thank God!

Mannering slammed the door behind him, haste his only concern now. The bang shattered the silence, but Mannering hardly heard it as he moved as fast as he could. He turned right, towards the side gate, for along the Champs-Elysees there was a greater risk of running into other *gendarmes* and passers-by.

Mannering opened the gate, and then he stopped dead still, his mind a strange medley of fear and hope.

He had entered by that gate twenty minutes before, and there had been no car nearby. Now a Renault taxi was standing there and the driver near it, a smallish man in drab grey. The Baron saw his eyes widen at sight of the body over his shoulder, and he dived for his gas-pistol.

Before he drew it out the driver spoke in sharp, streaming French, his hands moving expressively.

"*Nom de Dieu,* what happened? Is he dead?"

The vital importance of the words flashed through Mannering's mind as they tumbled upon each other. This was an accomplice of the unconscious thief 's. He must have hired a French cabby to get him away when the burglary was over, or else he always worked with an accomplice. Relief flooded through him as he answered breathlessly. "I don't think so. Hurry!"

"*Mais oui, mais oui*!" The cabby asked no questions, but climbed into his seat as Mannering opened the door of the back and bundled the unconscious thief inside. Mannering followed quickly, banging the door behind him.

As its tinny echo rang up and down the Rue de Balzac the side door of Panneraude's house opened, and light streamed from it, yellow against the darkness. High and clear through the night shrilled the imperative blast of the *gendarme's* whistle.

"*Sacré Dieu*!" muttered the driver, in a sudden panic.

Mannering bumped back against the roof, his foot catching the unconscious man's head. The driver let in the clutch, found his gears with a rasp, and trod on the accelerator so heavily that the car lurched forward in a series of short jerks. But it steadied,

and Mannering's tension eased. He had no love for reckless driving, but for once in his life he was glad of the Paris cabby's indifference to danger. No one would think twice about a taxi squealing round corners and ignoring the speed limit.

The Renault raced along the Rue de Balzac towards the Chateaubriand, and then turned right, rattling all the time. For the first five minutes Mannering did not notice their direction, he was busy first easing his victim to a seat, and then trying to find out how badly hurt he was.

The man was still breathing, and the Baron saw quickly the wound was too high up to be fatal. Now he had a choice; he could force the cabby to stop, and jump off near to the Bristol; or he could follow the affair of the wounded cracksman to its end.

The cab was travelling fast and the driver obviously meant to get as far away from the scene of the robbery as he could; there was a lot to be said for staying. Also, there were plenty of night haunts in the Bastille quarter—

Where he now knew they were heading – of a kind which would come in useful. He knew several of them, and he could slip into one, tidy himself up, and mix with the crowd. He would be recognised, and it would give him something of an alibi.

He decided to wait to the end of the journey, but it passed through his mind that with the jemmy and his other tools he would look stiff and awkward when he moved.

He had the folding jemmy in his pocket, and his tool-belt about his waist. His first temptation was to throw them out of the window, but they might be picked up quickly and give a clue to the route that the car had taken.

The alternative was obvious. It was awkward in the darkness and with the unconscious crook there, but he squeezed over to one side and raised one end of the leather-covered seat. There was a tray beneath, with two or three oily rags. The Baron undid his waistband, and dropped it with the jemmy into the tray. When the cabby found them he would drop them into the Seine as though they were red hot.

The terminus of the journey could not have suited him better.

He saw the name *Cabaret des Belles Femmes* in neon lighting outside a small building, with narrow passages running along

either side. A dozen people were idling outside, and several taxis were waiting. As his cab pulled into one of the alleys, a man and woman in evening dress came from the *Cabaret.*

The taxi jolted to a standstill, and the driver jumped out and pulled open Mannering's door. His rapid French was difficult to follow, but Mannering managed it.

"Quickly," he snapped. "We will carry him together."

Here was an alibi ready-made if it should be needed. The other cracksman had obviously taken a lot of trouble to prepare one – that savoured of Granette – and there was no reason why Mannering should not take advantage of it.

"All right," he said.

He went through a small door at the side of the hall, supporting the unconscious man's shoulders, with the cabby holding the feet. Another narrow passage, probably behind the stage, stopped at a closed door. The cabby butted it with his head, and a moment later Mannering was putting the body on a couch in an empty room.

The taxi man was smiling now, full of gestures and self-satisfaction. He was also waiting for something. Mannering slipped his fingers into his wallet and he rustled a hundred franc note. The cabby's beam proved that it was more than he had expected, and with a low bow and an expressive "*Merci, M'sieu*!" he went out. Crime was cheap in Paris.

Mannering sat down, feeling suddenly tired.

There he was, perched on a rickety chair in one of the dressing-rooms of the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes,* with an unconscious French criminal next to him, and without the slightest idea of who was expecting the man – unless it was Granette.

Well, his French and his wits would have to see him through, but he wished the thief would come round.

The wish was granted, for soon the broad-shouldered Frenchman grunted and opened his eyes; they were dark blue and expressive. He was still wearing his mask, but Mannering's had been off some time. Mannering saw the other's eyes wide, saw him draw back on the couch and glance swiftly round the room. Then in expressive bastard French he said: "*Sapristi*! You are still here!"

"I'm here," agreed the Baron, watching for a single false

move. He would have been paying particular attention to the man's right hand had he known it was Labolle, and had he an inkling of Labolle's reputation with a knife.

But the next words set his pulse racing, and he hardly noticed the glitter in the Frenchman's eyes. The words seemed loaded with venom, but not a venom directed towards the Baron.

"And Granette – he send *vous aussi.* Yes?"

Chapter Fifteen

Labolle Talks

Mannering hardly knew why the words came as such a surprise. He had been convinced Granette had inspired the other's burglary, yet the confirmation came in such an odd way. Had *Granette* sent the Baron to Panneraude's house?

"No, *mon brave,* he did not. But apparently he sent you, and failed to warn you I would be there."

Labolle was breathing heavily through his mouth; ugly, vicious-looking with his day's old stubble, yet not so villainous as others whom the Baron had met.

"Granette"—the word sounded like an oath—"'E knows you come?"

"He certainly did," said the Baron. It would help to antagonise the stranger towards Granette; obviously he was already thinking unpleasantly of the French member of Kelworthy's syndicate. "How're you feeling, Jules?"

It was a ruse to learn the other's name.

"I am Labolle – Benedicte Labolle." Those eyes narrowed as if the man was waiting for some sign of recognition, but none came, and Labolle went on slowly: "*Et vous, M'sieu le Baron, vous êtes n'est ce pas*?"

"Right in one, M'sieu Labolle! And although we know each other, we don't know Granette's intentions."

"A t'ousand pardons, *M'sieu le Baron.* We will talk of ourselves. Yes?" There was more than a tinge of sarcasm in Labolle's manner. "You veeseet Panneraude, an' ze diamonds you have zem?"

The Baron did not answer, and Labolle smiled thinly and without humour.

"*Cela ne fait rien*! You come, in my taxi. The driver, 'e is waiting?"

"I've paid him," said Mannering.

"*Bien*! And you 'ave ze—what you call 'eem?—ze alibi *ce*

soir!"

"I will have," said the Baron, gently. "That is, if you have one."

Labolle seemed to settle back more comfortably on the couch.

"So. Veree clevaire, *M'sieu le Baron.* An' now, my shoulder, eet ees not so good. You weell understan'? Who shot, *M'sieu*?"

"No names, no pack-drill," said the Baron "But you'll want it treated. Who shall I send for?"

"Gussi, 'e will do eet," Labolle said promptly. "Out of ze door, *le premier* passage right, and then you will see another door. You are so kind as to get heem?"

"And how will Gussi take to me?" inquired the Baron.

"Tell heem Labolle is in need," said the Frenchman, moving his right hand towards his pocket.

Mannering was on the half turn, and he missed the movement. A split second later he knew that he had made a big mistake, but there was nothing he could do now. Labolle's voice was suddenly very harsh.

"Your hands. Upwards! An' you will turn zis way!"

Mannering stopped dead still. Slowly his hands went as high as his shoulders, and he turned round. He found himself looking into dark blue eyes that glittered with more than suspicion, and at the hilt of a shining knife. The blade was between Labolle's dirty fingers, poised and ready. A single false move, and the knife would fly.

It was a moment when the Baron seemed face to face with disaster, and his heart was thumping painfully, his nerves on edge, that little pulse was beating fast in his temple.

"Zat ees correct. Now, *M'sieu le Baron,* press ze bell, by ze door. In good time Gussi will arrive, have no fright. *Et les diamants, M'sieu.*" There was a heavy, mocking emphasis on the words.

The Baron's voice came quietly.

"So we're not playing trust. And your shoulder is not so bad after all? Supposing we talk?"

"Ze bell, *M'sieu.*" Labolle's face was expressionless.

"It's a pity that I didn't leave you at Panneraude's place," the Baron said with mock anger. "Why, you nasty little swine, if I'd left you unconscious, you would be at a *Commissariat de Police* by now. I'm damned if I'll press the bell. Throw the knife if you

must."

The words echoed round the little room, and Mannering felt calm despite his fury. He was backing a belief that there was a streak of good in Labolle. Mannering knew his types well, and they split into two classes. The Granette type, who cared for nothing but his own success and his own neck, and the man who stole for a living, who regarded theft as a legitimate business, with the risks involved more than compensating for the fact that he dealt in other people's property.

There was something in the ugly face which made the Baron hope the man belonged to the latter type. As the blue eyes widened he was convinced of it. Now that he had a chance of studying Labolle he saw that the lips were full and generous. Labolle's nose was badly broken, and his ears were oddly pointed at the lobes. A livid scar on his right cheek was not an aid to beauty, and it helped the villainous effect.

"'Ow you mean?" Labolle spoke carefully.

"Use your head," the Baron said, more quietly. "You know that I gassed you at Panneraude's?"

"Zat ees so."

"You left the safe open. I took some of the jewels out of the safe and carried you to the head of the stairs. Panneraude was at the bottom and the lights were on. Panneraude's gun was as steady as your knife."

"An' it might slip," said Labolle ominously.

"Panneraude's gun did when I threw you at him," said the Baron simply.

Labolle's eyes widened, his knife went downwards a little, and Mannering dropped his hands to his side.

"You *threw* me?"

"You were on my shoulders and I slung you at him. There wasn't much breath in Panneraude after that, but there was quite a sensation. As I beat off the servants, a *gendarme* came to the door. I had to hit him, too. If your taxi hadn't been there—"

"*Attendez, M'sieu!* If this is true, 'ow come zat I am here, with you?"

"I picked you up again," said the Baron.

"*Sacré Dieu*! *Mais vous—les gendarmes—*"

"I didn't think you deserved to be left behind," said the Baron. "Panneraude fired as you went down, and I thought

you'd a more serious wound than it proved."

"It is a strange story," muttered Labolle. "An' yet – it is true, how else could this be?" He looked as though he could not believe his ears. "An' *les diamants*?"

Mannering put his hand in his pocket for the gems, seeing that Labolle moved his knife upwards. The man's eyes widened when he saw the gems, and he pushed his knife slowly into his waistband. Mannering's eyes were smiling as he took out cigarettes and offered them. Labolle said "*Merci*!" and a match flared up.

"An' now – Gussi, *s'il vous plait.* For ze time, it is friends. You an' me, *M'sieu le Baron*?"

"Friends it is," said the Baron with deep satisfaction. "Do I follow the same instructions?"

"But yes. And this time zere is no trick, *M'sieu*!"

Mannering took him at his word and went out of the dingy room. He followed the ill-lighted passages to the door Labolle had described, and tapped. A low-pitched voice called "*Entrez*!" Mannering stepped inside; and he found himself face to face with the fattest man he had ever seen in his life.

For a moment it seemed unreal.

The man was sitting by a small table, littered with papers. A long, thin cigar was poked from the corner of a rosebud of a mouth. Above it was a button of a nose, buried in fat flesh, two little brown eyes, a sloping forehead and pate as bald as a billiard ball halfway across the head, and fringed with fuzzy black hair.

Gussi was dressed in a blue shirt bursting at the seams in half a dozen places, a pair of grey flannel trousers and a pair of gaudy slippers. Whether he was surprised or not the Baron did not know, for that fat face could rarely show expression. He stood up slowly, his vast paunch quivering as he spoke in soft French.

"Who are you, *M'sieu*?"

"Labolle sent me," the Baron said. "He's been wounded, and needs first-aid."

"Wounded, so? Not badly, I hope?" Gussi had a mellow, impressive voice, and, astonishing though it was, moved with a certain easy grace. He turned towards a door that led from the small, square room, and as he opened it Mannering saw the

wash-basin, towels and the usual equipment of a small bathroom.

But the most astonishing thing was the magic of Labolle's name.

Without another word, Gussi collected a bowl of warm water, two towels and some bandages, iodine and a pair of scissors. He gave the bowl to Mannering and led the way out of the room. He made a jocular comment as he saw Labolle, and started to get down to cleansing the wound with a professional dexterity which Mannering found surprising. He pressed at the red and blue flesh after he had washed the coagulated blood, and as Labolle winced he said: "The bullet is still there, *mon vieux.* You will permit it to be removed?" Gussi spoke in English, in deference to the Baron. Labolle followed his example.

"Yes. Be quick."

He seemed indifferent to the inevitable pain, and Mannering watched the operation, fascinated. He admired the way those fat, podgy fingers handled the sharp knife Gussi had taken from his waistband, and Labolle's silent endurance. In a surprisingly short time the bullet was out, and the wound cleansed and bandaged.

Gussi stood up, breathing heavily. "That is all, Benedicte."

"Yes." Labolle looked piercingly towards Mannering. "You understan', *M'sieu,* 'e 'as been 'ere ze whole time, yes?"

"It is a pleasure to 'ave your presence, *M'sieu.*" Gussi bowed to Mannering, and his expression relaxed for once into what was intended for a smile. "Perhaps it will be good if, ver' soon, *M'sieu* appears in the big room. So many others, they may see you."

"An excellent idea," admitted Mannering, and his eyes showed his gratitude. He had certainly been well repaid for seeing Labolle safely home.

"Then come," said Gussi. "You can stay a short while, yes? An' afterwards you can talk with Labolle."

"*Mais oui, c'est bon*," Labolle approved. "Gussi, *le vin blanc, s'il vous plait.*"

"It will come, *mon vieux,* do not fear." Gussi nodded and opened the door, and Mannering followed him out.

There were many things that the Baron told himself he would like explained. The relationship between the cracksman

employed by Granette and the cabaret *patron* – for obviously Gussi owned or managed the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes* – was amicable to a degree.

Mannering stopped wondering when he reached the entrance to the cabaret hall. Gussi stood aside to let him enter, whispering to a girl waiting near the door. She wore sparkling stars on her breasts and tiny silvery panties, a youthful, cheeky *gamine* who gripped Mannering's arm with thin fingers and led him through the crowded room.

Mannering had a fair knowledge of Paris night-life, but he had never visited anything more typical than the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes.* It was crowded, with more than a sprinkling of the *élite* among the rougher types, *apaches* and the bourgeois, mingling amicably. There were several American tourists and a few English people who seemed prepared to sit and drink and gape. Music was coming from the stage set in the centre of the hall, and operated from beneath the floor. A solitary woman was dancing slowly and with an almost ethereal grace.

Mannering found his eyes drawn towards the dancer as his escort led him to a small table, and called shrilly to a waiter for champagne.

The order brought a dozen "hushes!" and glares of disapproval. Then every eye turned back to the centre of the hall. The slow, stately way the dancer moved to the music was fascinating, compelling. She was even more naked than his first escort – the little *gamine* had disappeared – but that was forgotten as he watched the dancing. He had never seen anything quite so lovely, quite so fascinating, so natural and yet unreal.

There was a deep hush over the hall until the music stopped. For a moment the dancer stood with her arms raised towards the ceiling, hands wide apart and slim shapely legs close together. Then Mannering saw that she was moving downwards, standing on a movable piece of the platform. As it began to fall the applause burst out, a constant roar. It lasted until the woman's hands had disappeared, with the spotlight on her all the time, changing its colours with a wild loveliness. Then the orchestra crashed out, a troupe of girls danced on to the stage, and the precious moment was gone.

Mannering smiled as the spell of that dance was broken,

tension eased by the cunning of Gussi and the little *gamine.* A dozen people not connected with the management, including at least two American couples, had seen him, and would certainly recognise him. Gussi was making sure of the alibi, and his little *gamine* escort would provide one for earlier in the evening.

Mannering waited for twenty minutes, before the girl came back. She wore a gossamer thin wrap, and Mannering realised that Gussi had sent her in before just to make sure she was noticed. He did not see the fat man as he went back along the passages, and Labolle was alone in his room. He seemed to be dozing, but his eyes opened when he saw Mannering.

"*Bon,* I 'ave the wait, *M'sieu.* It is what you want?"

"Gussi is very clever," said Mannering, and although Labolle made no comment,

Mannering knew that he had said a wise thing.

"Do you know him well?" "Ver' well, *M'sieu.* It was *la guerre,* you understan'? I was permit to be of service. Now 'e is the frien' in the hundred, *hein?* An' *La Supreme – M'sieu le Baron,* what you t'ink of her?"

Mannering's eyes narrowed.

"Was she dancing alone?"

"*Mais oui, M'sieu*! *La Supreme,* no others dance alone 'ere. Gussi, 'e is the 'usband."

"Good God!" gasped Mannering.

"It is the life, an' they are 'appy. Now, *M'sieu,* we talk. You 'ave the diamants. We divide, *n'est ce pas*? Fifty-fifty, is it not?"

"You did the real work," protested the Baron. "And there is Granette."

"Granette!" said Labolle softly. "'E will not worry, *M'sieu le Baron.* 'E is after a special stone, not those."

Labolle stopped suddenly, his eyes narrowing, for he stared at the diamond that had leapt into the Baron's hand.

"*Sapristi, M'sieu,* it is it! Ze size, the appearance, *exactement*!"

"Yes," smiled the Baron. "We were after the same stone. But Granette should have warned you."

"Permit me, *M'sieu*! Granette, 'e come today, 'e tells me of a *M'sieu* Man'ring, whom I shall kill, yes?" Labolle touched the knife suddenly, and the Baron's spine chilled. "That I onderstan'! You, you would perhaps lie, *M'sieu.* I try to what you say – catch *M'sieu le Baron,* or *M'sieu* Man'ring, it is the

same. *Mais non*! I work for Granette, yes, but I not kill one who save me. Benedicte Labolle know when to believe. I work for Granette, but ‘e is a dog! You ‘ave done for me big service. Now, *M’sieu.* You onderstan’?”

Chapter Sixteen

Shocks

In the moments that flashed by as he met Labolle's straight gaze Mannering realised that the Frenchman had been the winner in that battle of wits. But Mannering had been thinking that Labolle was ill-disposed towards Granette; instead he was still with the man, and he had held his hand simply because Mannering had saved him from Panneraude.

He broke the silence at last.

"I see. So you want this for Granette?"

"You do not onderstan'," said Labolle gravely. "Labolle fails to win one-two *petits* diamants – poof! He is disturbed, *le Baron* beats him up. *Le Baron* won, *M'sieu, chez Panneraude,* and he has the diamant!"

The Baron tossed the glittering gem towards the ceiling and caught it, almost gloating. The Crown of Castile, and it was his!

"Fine! Then I'll keep this and these others are yours." He pointed to the smaller stones.

The more he saw of Labolle the more he liked him. It seemed that Labolle's 'honesty' was crystal clear, according to his lights. This was a queer mix-up, with the fat Gussi, the lovely *La Supreme,* and Labolle to represent the *apache.* A man with an astonishing character – yet a garrotter.

He pushed his thoughts to one side. "Are you safe now, Labolle?"

"*Mais oui*! There is no worry, *M'sieu.* An' you, you tell those who may ask, yes, that the night it was spen' at the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes.* There is no other dangaire, *M'sieu*?"

"From the police? I don't think so," said the Baron.

"*Bien*!" There was a tap on the door, and it opened at his call. Mannering's eyes widened as he recognised the woman who entered. She was smiling, a tall, slim creature swathed in a plain silk wrap, and in her dark hair a sparkling diamante tiara. Her bare feet were thrust into backless slippers, but it was the dark

hair with the tiara that told Mannering that *La Supreme* was paying a visit to Labolle. She was not beautiful in the conventional sense, but her features were very delicate, and her complexion quite lovely. There was a transparency about her skin that was almost unreal. Mannering felt the fascination of her blue eyes as she glanced at him in well-controlled surprise, and then at Labolle.

"Benedicte, I am so sorry. I know not zat—"

"*M'sieu le Baron,"* said Labolle quickly, "'E 'as been admiring you, *ma cherie.*"

La Supreme's eyes glowed as she looked at Mannering.

"It is a pleasure, *M'sieu.*" Her English was prettier than her French.

Mannering bowed. "I've never been so moved by dancing."

The compliment pleased her as it would a child, and as her words tumbled out Mannering was astonished again by the naïvety of these people.

"That is ver' charming of you, *M'sieu.* Benedicte now, 'e can never say ze word *comme ça*!" She twinkled at Labolle. "But 'e is our ver' good friend, *M'sieu.* 'E 'as told you that one day 'e save the life of Gussi, yes?"

"He did say something about it," said the Baron, "and—"

Gussi entered the room before he could go on. Fat and quivering, the Frenchman nevertheless walked with the grace that was one of the most remarkable features of the trio. Not until afterwards did Mannering learn that Gussi had been a tap dancer until eight years before, when his weight had grown too much for him, and he had invested in the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes.* Gussi was no more than forty-five, and *La Supreme* near the forty mark. The friendship between them and the *apache* was obviously deep-rooted.

Mannering talked for five minutes, and then stood up. Gussi smiled at him, that absurd rosebud of a mouth twisted.

"We shall be 'appy always to see you, *M'sieu.* "

"*Et moi aussi,"* said *La Supreme.* "A frien' of Benedicte, *M'sieu,* is always welcome."

"For me," said Benedicte Labolle, "I can be found here, *M'sieu Baron,* at most times."

Mannering shook hands all round, an odd feeling of mingled relief and disbelief warring in him, before Gussi showed him to

the main hall. On the small floor a crowd was dancing to hot rhythm, and a few people noticed Mannering as he threaded his way between the tables. But the pert little *gamine* appeared at the door, and Mannering thrust a twenty franc note into her hand.

A moment later he sat back in his cab in deep satisfaction.

As he entered the foyer of the Hotel Bristol, the night-porter moved from his counter. Mannering did not notice the man's expression until he was halfway to the lift. Then he saw the uncertainty and the question in the man's eyes.

He frowned. "What is it?"

"*M'sieu,* there is a gentleman to see you."

"To see *me*? At this time of night? What name, Jean?"

"*M'sieu*!" There was a message in the porter's eyes, but none on his lips. Mannering's guard went up instinctively. "He is in the lounge, *M'sieu,* and requests me to give no name. A thousand pardons, *M'sieu*!"

Mannering had a mental picture of a black Peugeot and a heavy-jowled Frenchman.

"That's all right." He turned towards the lounge, knowing the door was open and that the man in there could hear every word. Moreover, Jean was not the type to be nervous without good reason, and to Mannering that spelled two words.

The police.

Only the police would have prevented him from passing on a message.

The police; and he had the Crown of Castile in his pocket!

Mannering's lips were curved as he passed into the lounge. He hesitated on the threshold as a short, clean-shaven man stood up from a settee. He was well-dressed, heavy about the chin, with a pair of keen, grey eyes that swept Mannering up and down. His lips were red and full, and he did not look at all like an *agent.*

"Good evening," said Mannering. "What can I do for you?"

"My apologies, *M'sieu.*" The Frenchman bowed. "A small inquiry that I am compelled to make."

"It's rather late for inquiries," Mannering said good-humouredly, not at all like a man on guard. Actually he hardly knew what the man was saying. The Crown of Castile seemed like fire in his pocket although his tools and equipment were

under the seat of a Renault taxi. He had never found it more difficult to keep his smile bright. His heart was thumping, and there was an odd, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. For French police methods were different from English. There would be no formality of a search warrant, and if the diamond was found the Baron was finished. He knew he should have left the Crown with Labolle. Confidence and satisfaction had made him careless. The little Frenchman's eyes seemed to be probing for the truth, and seconds dragged.

If Mannering had to run, it would be the end of life as John Mannering.

Odd thoughts flashed through his mind. The unexpectedness of this had startled him so much that he had not been able to see the full significance. Now he saw them, and was ready for trouble.

The Frenchman lifted his hands deprecatingly, and then slipped his fingers into his vest pocket.

"I agree that it is late, *M'sieu.* But my authority, you will understand, is correct."

He showed the card of the *Sûreté Nationale,* and Mannering frowned as he eyed it.

"The *police, M'sieu* Robierre? My room's all right, isn't it?"

The other's eyes flickered, and Mannering knew that he had made a good impression. The doubt that had seemed to show in the other's face faded.

"But yes, *M'sieu.* It is not anything that has happened at the hotel."

"Then what is it?" demanded Mannering. "And is it going to take long? If so, a drink—"

"I shall be happy to join you," said the detective, and Mannering knew that this was not going to be easy. He called for the porter, waving Robierre to a seat.

"Jean, some special Courvoisier. That is to your liking, *M'sieu* Robierre?"

"Admirable." Robierre seemed in no great hurry.

Jean brought the brandy and half filled two glasses, bowed and went out, closing the door behind him. Mannering's eyes were gleaming as he regarded the Frenchman and inhaled the bouquet.

"Your very good health, *M'sieu.* And now – what can I do for

you?"

"It is my duty, you understand? Tonight, at the house of *M'sieu* Pierre Panneraude, on the Champs-Elysees, there was a very daring robbery. You understand?"

So it was the Panneraude job, and his position *was* acutely dangerous. Damn Bristow!

"I do and I don't, *M'sieu* Robierre. How can I help you?"

"*M'sieu* Mannering, I will be frank." Robierre's hands were no longer moving, his body seemed tense. "Were you at the house of *M'sieu* Panneraude tonight?"

Mannering stared, apparently so surprised that he could find no words. And then to Robierre's surprise, he chuckled.

"I certainly was not! I know the place, of course. Anyhow, what made you come to me?"

Robierre's hands spread out again. What would he have done, thought Mannering, had he been able to see the diamond in Mannering's vest pocket?

"It is difficult to explain, *M'sieu* Mannering. Let me endeavour. You have heard of a big English jewel thief, by name the Baron?"

"I certainly have."

"*Bon.* Then you will know why we are anxious to make an arrest, when you learn that the Baron was at *M'sieu* Panneraude's house. The description, the method of entry, everything was characteristic of him."

"I still don't see where I can help," said Mannering.

"You will understand that we had information from Scotland Yard about the Baron. And you will understand *my* surprise, *M'sieu,* when I learned that *you* might be the man for whom I search." Robierre's voice had hardened.

"That is absurd," Mannering said shortly.

"Perhaps, *M'sieu.* But I am informed that you are in Paris and at this hotel. Also, *le Baron,* he is in Paris. And I discover that you left your hotel an hour before the robbery is committed. My man, he loses you."

Mannering moved back from Robierre, taking a cigarette and lighting it without moving his gaze from the Frenchman.

"So you are accusing me, *M'sieu* Robierre, of visiting *M'sieu* Panneraude's house as the Baron. And you had the impertinence to have me followed?"

"Reluctantly, *M'sieu.* I must ask you to explain your movements for this night."

"I see. *M'sieu* Robierre, I don't wish it to be known where I have spent the evening. I do not think that the matter need interest you."

Robierre took half a step forward.

"It is a matter of great interest! Particularly now. *M'sieu* Mannering, I must ask you to allow me to search—"

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Mannering. "Must I remind you that I am a British subject, under the protection of the British Consul?"

"And I must inform you that I have this information from the English police, and that it is a matter of time only before the Consul will give me permission to do just what I wish! Meanwhile, I shall if necessary, make sure that you are locked in a room at *le Commissariat de Police.* My powers, they are considerable, *M'sieu.*"

"Your powers would be nothing like so considerable if you make a mistake on this," said Mannering. "It isn't always wise to arrest an Englishman, and to be forced to admit a mistake."

"And I warn you, *M'sieu*!" Mannering knew that Robierre was feeling exactly as Bill Bristow had felt on several occasions; he believed that he had cornered the Baron, and to arrest the Baron was the dream of practically every policeman on the Continent or in England. "You will kindly permit me—"

Mannering laughed again, and Robierre stopped abruptly, hands waving quickly.

"You are prepared to joke, perhaps."

"It's funny, *M'sieu*! I was anxious to see just how far you would go, and I'll have a word with the Commissioner of Scotland Yard, for it is very annoying. Does anyone but your department know you are here?"

Robierre's voice was sharp.

"Only the porter. But understand, *M'sieu,* that—"

"I'm not threatening to cause you trouble," said Mannering easily. His voice became confidential. "I'm anxious that this evening's interview shouldn't be broadcast. You will understand, *M'sieu,* that I do not want it known that since twelve o'clock, until half an hour ago, I was at the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes.* I can offer good evidence of an intimate kind,

and I am prepared to give it. But—no word to the Press, *M'sieu*!"

Robierre's eyes were narrowed now, but with a smile. Mannering had appealed to the romantic who lurked in every Frenchman.

"I understand. No word shall pass, if you can prove this."

"Go to the place and inquire," said Mannering.

"You understand, you will not leave the hotel until I return?"

"Of course," said the Baron.

Robierre bowed, and turned away. Even as he left the lounge, the Baron's sixth sense of danger was highly sensitive. Were there others nearby? Was the surveillance as thorough as it had been in London, with the added disadvantage that he did not know the man he was dealing with, nor the powers of the Paris police?

He followed Robierre, meeting Jean in the foyer.

"*M'sieu, c'est terrible! M'sieu L'lnspecteur,* he has left others to watch. What has happened, *M'sieu* Mannering?"

"We all make mistakes," smiled the Baron, "and Robierre has made a big one. Jean, there's to be no mention of this to anyone else."

"I am silent, *M'sieu,* as always."

"I'll go up myself, Jean, and when *M'sieu* Robierre calls again, I'll be in my room. He has gone to make sure that I was at the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes.*"

Understanding flooded through the porter's mind, and his smile was more free.

"*Mais oui, M'sieu,* it is understood! I will telephone when *M'sieu* Robierre is on the way."

"Thanks," said the Baron, and he reached the automate lift. He went up to the second floor and unlocked the door, relocked it and turned round.

Facing him was Anita de Castilla, a gaily-coloured wrap thrown loosely over primrose yellow pyjamas. Fear was vivid in her eyes.

Chapter Seventeen

Complications

The Baron could hardly believe the fact that Anita was here. He stood still for a few seconds. She seemed afraid to speak, and Mannering forced words out. The Crown of Castile had to be safely hidden before Robierre's return, but he had to know what had happened to Anita.

"Do you always call as late as this?" he said.

Anita's body seemed to melt and before he realised it she was in front of him, her arms about him tightly and her lovely face upturned.

"John, something terrible has happened. You—you must help, you must!"

"If anyone can help," said the Baron, easing her arms away and moving towards a settee.

She refused to release him altogether, and Mannering could feel her slim, soft limbs pressed close to his. Her imperiousness and coquettishness were gone, and Mannering knew she trusted him implicitly. It was pleasant to be trusted, but she was temptingly lovely.

He pushed the thought aside as he offered her cigarettes.

"What is it, then?" he asked.

She took a cigarette, and broke it in half between her twitching fingers.

"John – you will not be angry if I tell you?"

"I'll start the story. I came over today because Juan told me that you had come to try to steal the Crown, with young Lenville. I've been watching you, just to make sure that you didn't do anything too foolish. So you see, you weren't neglected."

"So you know!" She was wildly excited. "Then it is easier for you to understand! Teddy went to Panneraude's house and tried to get the Crown—oh, fool that I was! I rang him again and again, but there has been trouble. Teddy is in such trouble. The

police know of the burglary and are seeking him. John – it was I, not Teddy. I sent him there.

He must not go to prison or—"

"Steady on," interrupted Mannering. He stood up, a dozen conflicting thoughts in his mind. He looked down on her pale cheeks thrown into vivid relief by her dark hair, her red lips open a little, glistening, white teeth just showing. The flawless lines of her throat, the provocative swell of her breasts, could easily go to a man's head. Mannering made himself concentrate on the entreaty in her eyes.

There was one leading question: who had telephoned her, telling her that Lenville was in trouble?

Unless Granette had been lying all the time, Lenville had not been near Panneraude's place. But Granette had tried once to compromise Anita, and he would probably try again. In fact Granette had telephoned her, getting her into this frenzy; there would have to be a showdown before long.

For the moment the urgent need was to get Anita back to her room.

"You don't know who phoned you?"

"No, he gave no name. It was a friend—"

"It was a liar," said Mannering. "I've had a man watching Panneraude's house all the evening and although there was trouble, Lenville wasn't concerned."

"*Dios*! Someone lied to me? John, are you sure?"

"I tell you that I had a private detective watching the house, to stop Lenville trying to get in."

"Then this man, your detective, he stopped Teddy?"

"I expect so." Mannering could not disillusion Anita just then, for Lenville obviously meant more to her than anyone had thought.

"Then where is Teddy? And why should a man tell me—"

"I promise you there's no need to worry about Lenville, and that the police will never know he was anywhere near Panneraude's place. I don't know that you deserve it—"

"And why?" She was up in arms at once.

"Because it was a foolish thing to do, Anita. If anything had happened to make the police charge you, what would Juan and your father have felt? What made you do it?"

She shrugged those slim shoulders, her eyes smouldering.

"The Crown, it is ours—*mine*! All my life I have loved that stone, and when I knew the Baron, he was after it, I was angry. And I would do it again!"

The Baron bent down and took her wrists in his fingers. He lifted her slowly towards him from the settee.

"I daresay you would, whether Lenville went to prison for it and the others suffered hell. It's time to grow up, Anita!"

"You deliberately insult me!" All her pride was in her voice, and she strained away from him.

"It's just the truth," said Mannering, "but I love you for it." Love? She was utterly desirable, and he had to force himself to go on: "If you're not back in your room quickly there'll be trouble. I've some friends coming up. If they find the daughter of Don Manuel y Alvarez de Castilla in a bachelor's Paris room at two-thirty in the morning—"

"What do I care?" she flashed. She squeezed his hand. "All right, I will hurry back."

"Where's your room?"

"On the next floor."

"I'll come as far as the stairs," said Mannering. "Pull that wrap closer."

For the first time she realised that her dressing-gown had been gaping. She coloured as Mannering opened the door, and was still flushed when she reached the stairs and sped upwards. At her landing she waved back.

Mannering turned, glancing down the two flights of stairs near his rooms, and the lift shaft. There was no one in sight, which meant that Robierre's men were concentrating on preventing him from leaving the Bristol, not watching his room. Half an hour had passed since Robierre had gone, and he would want no more than an hour. The Crown of Castile was still burning a hole in Mannering's pocket, but his lips curved as he thought of what Anita might have said had she realised that her heart had been so close to the diamond.

There was nowhere in the hotel rooms where he could safely leave the stone. He thought of the bathroom fittings and dismissed them as impracticable. The police here were as expert as Scotland Yard at searching, and the grilles would be the first places to be examined.

A glance round his rooms as he entered them again made him

scowl. It was obvious that they had been searched already; that Robierre had paid a visit before Mannering had returned. That probably explained the porter's anxiety. Was it worth assuming that Robierre, with the alibi confirmed, would not trouble to search again?

A soft breeze coming through the partly-open window changed the trend of his thoughts. He reached the window in two strides and pulled it wide open. The shutters and the frames were of the conventional French type, and there was a small verandah outside little more than a yard wide. He stepped out, looking down over the narrow street below. Dingy buildings, dark and shadowy, yet with a silver sky above them, were opposite.

The Baron had asked for a back room, knowing that it would be quieter than one facing a main boulevard, and it was going to serve him in good stead. Upwards, the building stretched for another five storeys, with small verandahs jutting out from the wall. These were directly beneath each other, and shaped masonry ran in parallel, vertical lines from roof to foundation: the verandahs were built between each pile.

The Baron glanced quickly right and left, satisfying himself that the only light was coming from the street lamps. No one was likely to see him. He stepped to the edge of his verandah, stretching his arms towards the jutting pillars.

He could touch them with the palms of his hands and get a good hold. His heart was racing, but with exhilaration.

This kind of danger was like heady wine. He gripped the pillars and swung from the verandah. His whole weight came on to his arms and shoulders, but he was prepared for it. For a moment he hung swinging over the street, with a sheer drop of sixty feet to the concrete below.

He paused for a second, to make sure that his muscles were relaxed enough, and swung gently towards the next verandah. He was afraid to make any noise, for he might disturb the occupants of the next room, but his shoes grated sharply against the stone.

But he found purchase.

He stood slantwise now, from the pillar to the next verandah, gripping the pillar with his hands and forcing his feet against the granite, his knees bent a little. Again he paused. The cool

night air seemed to force its way between his collar and his neck, sending shivers down his spine. The strain on his arms was painful, but he started again.

The possibility of crashing downwards was present all the time. A single slip and it would be all over. He repeated the manoeuvre twice, coming to rest on the verandah of a room two rooms away from his own.

He was breathing hard, but there was elation in his mind for Robierre would never dream of coming as far as this. The moon enabled him to see without a torch, and for a few seconds he crouched, waiting and tense, making sure no one had been alarmed.

The blinds of the room beyond the verandah were pulled to, and the windows tightly closed. Someone disliked fresh air. The Baron's main thought was that no one would hear him as he searched the verandah balcony for a break in the plaster or the granite.

In one corner the plaster of the wall had been chipped away, where a hanging sign had once been fixed, and there was a hole no bigger than a pigeon's egg beneath it. The Baron slipped the Crown of Castile from his pocket, wrapped in cotton-wool, and pushed it into the hole.

It was a tight fit, and he stood back a moment, trying to judge whether the white would show up too clearly against the drab wall. To lessen the risk he took his fountain-pen from his pocket, pressed the filler and squirted ink over the fingers of his right-hand glove. It took only a moment to smear the ink over the cotton-wool so that nothing showed white, and the Baron was smiling as he replaced the pen and started the hazardous journey back.

With the knowledge that the diamond was safe, and the fear that Robierre would return before he had finished gone, he quickly returned. Once his right foot slipped against a pillar, and his heart seemed to turn over as he swung over eternity. He found purchase again, but his forehead was wet with sweat, the palms of his hands were sticky.

"Too bloody close," he muttered.

Then very clearly from his open window he heard the ringing of the telephone bell.

He was at the next balcony, minutes must pass before he

reached his own room, yet Robierre was on the way up, or Jean would not be ringing! He knew he would have to take the biggest risk he had ever dared.

Robierre must not find him by the window or the game would be up. The one way to get in quickly was to jump from balcony to balcony.

The balconies were so narrow that he would have to keep close to the wall as he went; he could not have his hands outstretched to give himself balance. And the gap was eight feet or more, long enough at any time for a single jump.

Could he do it?

For a split second Mannering hesitated. The chance of success seemed remote, and the sixty feet to the ground seemed to have grown into hundreds. He drew a short, sharp breath, tensed his muscles and jumped – with the telephone bell ringing loud in his ears.

For a moment he was flying through space, his left hand close to his side and brushing against the wall, his right hand stretched ahead of him. The balcony loomed closer. He was clear of both of them and falling, falling. His left hand shot up to support the right, and desperately his fingers clutched about the ledge, and the strain of his thirteen stone came suddenly on his shoulders.

The pain that shot through them was excruciating, but he had no time to rest, and in the exhilaration of knowing he was safe he hardly needed any. He pulled himself up, reached the balcony wall with one knee, and half-fell on to the balcony. He was sweating, his head was aching, and the telephone bell was still ringing, very loudly.

He stepped through the window and pushed it to behind him. He took off his gloves as he hurried to the bedroom, then his coat and shoes. The bell had stopped now, but footsteps were coming along the passage.

The toes of the Baron's shoes were scratched, and there was a coating of grey dust on his coat sleeve and trousers. He brushed the cloth quickly, flung the coat on the bed and then realised that the ink on his glove fingers was still wet.

That would do for the shoes.

As he picked the glove from the bed he heard a tap at the door, light and discreet. He was in a ferment of anxiety, but

every move he made was cool and deliberate. The ink darkened the white patches where the patent leather had been scratched from the toe-caps and he put the shoes quietly by the end of the bed before grabbing a dressing-gown. He dropped on to the bed, full length, and as his muscles relaxed the tap came again, sharper, more imperious.

Mannering drew a deep breath, and called out thickly: "Hallo, there?"

"*M'sieu,* it is I, Robierre."

"*Robierre!"* Mannering's voice was suddenly clearer. He raised himself from the bed, making sure the springs creaked and pushed a pillow to the floor. Only the bedside lamp was burning when he opened the door and stifled a convincing yawn.

"Sorry. I was dozing."

"Yes," said Robierre, and in the dim light the Baron thought the policeman looked more menacing. Perhaps it was because he had heard the telephone ringing and guessed that Jean had warned Mannering.

"Well?" Mannering demanded.

"I have made sure, *M'sieu* Mannering. You were at the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes, ce soir.*"

"Good," said the Baron enthusiastically. "I can go to bed?"

"A thousand pardons, *M'sieu,* but I have my duty. With your permission I will search the rooms. It is a little thing, you understand." Robierre's English was suffering badly, and told Mannering that the other disliked this job.

Mannering laughed, and offered cigarettes.

"If you've really got to."

"*Bien*! It is good you have no objection, *M'sieu.* I am gratified. My men, they are outside. With your permission—"

Mannering rested on the bed while the rooms were searched, occasionally stifling a yawn. When a diminutive French detective picked up the scratched shoes, he drew a deep breath.

The man felt in the shoes, tapped the heels conscientiously and replaced them without noticing the scratches. He was going through the pockets of the coat now, and Mannering saw him take out the gloves.

Would he feel the damp fingertips, discover the ink and ask questions? Mannering hardly dared breathe, but the Frenchman pressed the gloves, satisfied himself they concealed nothing, and

then went through the Baron's few clothes.

Robierre was busy searching the furniture, tapping the wainscoting and the floorboards. Had the diamond been in the room it would have been found, for Robierre even rolled the carpets up, tested the curtains and the blinds, and spent a long time in the bathroom. Mannering heard him unscrewing the grilles to the waste pipes and the runaway.

They finished at last. Robierre came into the room with Mannering's gun – an ordinary pistol which fired gas pellets.

"I've a licence for that," Mannering said. "Ask Scotland Yard."

Slowly, Robierre put the pistol down.

"You understand"—his English was better now—"I could not avoid it. I am happy there is nothing to find, *M'sieu* Mannering."

"I'm happy I can get some rest," said Mannering, and he offered his hand. "I'll talk to Scotland Yard, *M'sieu* Robierre. Goodnight."

"Goodnight, *M'sieu*!" Robierre smiled, his appreciation of Mannering's gesture obvious. He called to his men and left the room.

Mannering waited twenty minutes, until he was sure they had gone and then braced himself for his second ordeal. The journey to the other verandah had been unnerving, but he had to go back now. At least there would be no hurry this time.

The trip to and from the Crown of Castile's hiding-place was a nightmare, but at last he had the diamond, and was safely back in his bedroom.

As he got into his pyjamas his mind was working more slowly over the events of the past few days. Granette and Kelworthy had yet another setback, Mannering himself had three gems – the Isabella, the Desire Diamond, and the Crown of Castile. Granette had the Sea of Fire, while Van Royton, in New York, had the Flame Ruby.

Despite his deep sense of satisfaction, the game was a long way from finished. Granette would be doubly dangerous. If he used garrotters again, it would be a different type from Benedicte Labolle. But for the rescue at Panneraude's, Labolle's knife would have found a billet last night.

His eyes closed, his breathing grew more regular, thoughts drifted. A shaft of moonlight shone over his face, leaving a sharp line from his forehead to the left side of his face. For half

an hour there was no sound in the room but his breathing. Then something else came, very slowly.

It was a faint, barely audible clicking at the lock of the door.

It stopped suddenly, there was a moment's pause and then the door began to open slowly, and outlined against the light of the passage was the lean figure of Jules Granette.

Chapter Eighteen

Granette Comes Prepared

Granette entered the room very quickly, shutting the door behind him to make sure that the lock did not click loudly enough to waken the sleeper, and stepped soft-footed towards Mannering. As he crossed the patch of moonlight it showed his lips turned back until the gums were bare, and the evil glitter in his eyes.

The knife in his right hand was in the shadows.

He had planned the night so perfectly, but first one calculation and then another had been upset. He had been watching out for danger when Labolle had raided Panneraude's house. Labolle should have been ready for Mannering, and according to Granette's plans the Baron would have been found dead by an open safe, but somehow Mannering had slipped by the *apache,* and when the first alarm had been raised Granette had hurried away. He had gone soon afterwards to the *Belles Femmes,* to see if Labolle had returned.

Benedicte Labolle told him what he had done. Granette had raved and raged, but there had been something about Labolle's eyes that had warned him not to go too far.

Knowing Mannering had the Crown, Granette had hurried to the Bristol, but Robierre had been before him.

Granette had been quick to realise that Robierre had found nothing. He had waited until the police had gone and then entered the hotel. Jean had saluted, thinking Granette had a room there.

He had hurried into a ground floor cloakroom, waited there for over an hour and then started the trip upstairs. Mannering's room number was already known to him.

Now he was less than a yard from the Baron and the knife was raised in his right hand. Mannering's eyes did not flicker, his breathing was deep and steady. Granette's eyes were narrowed, the twist of his lips mingled triumph and satisfaction.

He stood poised with the knife only a few inches away from Mannering's throat, and then suddenly pressed his left hand over the sleeper's mouth.

Mannering felt the sudden pressure without knowing what it was. He had been heavily asleep, and his numbed senses told him only that there was a weight against his lips. The numbness passed as his eyes opened and he saw Granette's face, with the moonlight glinting like silver on the steel of the knife poised so steadily above his throat.

The Baron lay there, very still. The Frenchman's voice came like a whisper hushed and sibilant.

"Keep silent, when I remove my hand."

Still Mannering did not move. A single movement of that knife would finish him, Granette would not be like Labolle. His mind began to work swiftly, desperately, and fear went very vividly through his mind.

Granette removed his left hand, slowly. Mannering opened his lips, but did not speak.

"So you are wise. You do not want to alarm the police, eh? Excellent, my dear Mannering. Now – we will talk. But you will be very quiet, as I told you."

Mannering shifted his position very slowly, and the knife cut downwards until the point was pricking his throat. There would be no mercy here. In that moment a sudden conviction flashed through his mind that Granette would kill him after they had talked, if not before. He had to gain time.

"Do you mind if I get comfortable?"

Granette drew back, the steel point left Mannering's neck, but it left a little globule of blood which Mannering could feel trickling downwards.

"For the time being you can be comfortable. It will be perhaps your last chance."

"I'm a little tired of the word," said Mannering.

"*Parbleu*! It will not pay you to be tired. First – you have the Crown of Castile. I want it."

Mannering's eyes gleamed, a mocking nonchalance in his expression and his voice.

"I worked hard for that, Granette, even to outwitting the police. Do you think I'll let it go easily?" There was no point in lying. As his wits grew sharper, he realised the danger of his

position more acutely. Granette would not be here unless he had planned a foolproof getaway.

Granette's teeth showed again.

"Not easily, certainly not easily! You have a knife at your throat. A single move and you are dead. I can have time to get the jewel, for you have it here, even though Robierre does not know it."

"If you can search the rooms better than he did—" began the Baron, but Granette cut him short. There was a concentrated fury in his words.

"That is enough! There will be no time-wasting, Mannering!"

The knife came downwards like a flash, but Granette's hands were steady, and again only the point grazed Mannering's skin. There was sweat over Mannering's body, and he knew that bluffing was useless. For the moment at least he had to give way.

He drew a deep breath, and found it easy to feign fear.

"I can't stand this!" he muttered. "Take that damned knife away."

"And the diamond?" The knife did not move, and as Mannering talked and the muscles of his neck moved he could feel its sharp pressure.

"In my wallet, on the chair." The words were jerky.

"Take it out," murmured Granette.

Mannering moved over slowly, taking the wallet with his right hand. He extracted the Crown of Castile, still in its cotton-wool wrapping, and as Granette's left hand moved towards it he played with the idea of making his effort. But the knife was still there.

"So," murmured Granette. He clutched the diamond in his left hand, easing backwards with the knife. "The Baron gives back what he takes, *hein?* And now the other gems, my fine thief. The Isabella Diamond and the Desire stone. Where are they, eh, Mannering?"

"In London," Mannering said, but his eyes were staring at the knife, not at Granette. The Frenchman realised it, and pushed the knife down slowly. Mannering tried to shrink back in his pillows, and if ever a man looked afraid for his life the Baron did at that moment.

"In London, Mannering? And where? At your flat?"

"Don't be a fool. They're in safe deposits."

"Yes?" Granette's voice sharpened. "Which ones? And under what name?"

"Watson – and Wilson," Mannering muttered. "The tickets are in my flat, in a panel of the oak wardrobe. That's all I can tell you! Take that knife away, I can't stand it! *Take it away*!"

"You won't need to stand it for long," murmured Granette, and Mannering had never seen a more diabolical expression than there was in Granette's eyes. "I have the information, Mannering, but I am not foolish enough to think you would stop and leave me to get the diamonds. And here, after Robierre has been – what more natural than for you to cut your throat? You understand, my friend?"

Mannering did understand.

The words were uttered with a cold-blooded intentness and a venom giving no shred of hope that Granette would change his mind. Murder was in those contemptuous grey eyes, cold and callous. Granette stared down, enjoying this grim, macabre moment, and the knife moved slowly downwards.

Mannering leapt.

There was nothing else to do, the chance had to be taken.

But as he gathered his muscles and started moving Mannering saw the flash in Granette's eyes, and the moon glinted on the light of the steel as it came downwards. It was like living his last moment, there was a terrible conviction in his mind that death was coming.

He felt a sharp, searing pain as the edge cut through his skin and flesh, a sharpness that was sickening. But he was still moving, and the knife was buried in the pillow, not in his throat!

He had his right hand free. Before Granette could regain control of the knife Mannering hit him, clenched fist cracking into the man's jaw. Granette gasped and reared backwards, and the Baron moved like a man possessed. As the Frenchman was falling the knife curved a blood-dripping arc in his hand, and the Baron's fingers tightened round the wrists like steel springs. Every ounce of his strength went into the grip. Granette groaned, his nerveless fingers opened and the knife dropped to the bed, spraying blood over the sheet and the pillowcase. Mannering saw the red stains, and they sent a murderous rage

through him, a fury that seemed to obsess him.

Yet all the time the need for silence was in his mind.

He was off the bed now, with Granette's wrist still clenched in his right hand. With his left Mannering smashed Granette's face, not feeling the pain of the blow, although the skin at his knuckles was split. Again and again he hit the Frenchman, while Granette was moaning and slobbering and trying to evade those dreadful, battering blows. Granette was a different man now, half fainting, moaning for mercy, talking in French all the time.

The red rage was passing, but there was a kind of brittleness in the Baron's head that he did not understand, a feeling of unreality. There was Granette, helpless across the bed, every atom of colour drained from his cheeks and with his lips slobbering in fear. His nose was bloody and probably broken, and the skin at his mouth was badly lacerated. Mannering's knuckles were red and raw.

"It doesn't look pretty," said the Baron harshly. "And nor do you. Remember this, when you think of trying to corner the Baron again."

He picked up the knife idly, still with that queer brittleness, almost a weakness, strange to him, and Granette's breath hissed. Mannering laughed, but he had to steady himself against the bed rail.

"Scared, Granette? It's different when the odds are reversed, isn't it? But I prefer this—"

He moved to the wardrobe quickly and he had an automatic from his coat pocket before Granette realised what he was doing. He swung round, levelling the gun at Granette's face, and the Frenchman tried to hedge away. Mannering's voice was still harsh.

"Don't worry to get comfortable, Granette. Explain one or two facts. First, where's the emerald you took from Price?"

There was no fight left in the man.

"In—in Kelworthy's safe. It has a double bottom."

"That'll do," said the Baron. His knuckles were smarting where the skin was raw, and the right side of his neck was stiff. That knife cut would take some explaining. His pyjama coat was coated with blood near the neck, and liberally sprayed down the front. He realised how close he had been to death as he took the Crown from Granette's pocket. "Granette, listen to me. Don't try

to get van Royten's ruby. Don't try any tricks with Anita de Castilla. Don't come after me again. Next time I'll kill you."

Granette lurched forward, from the bed to his knees, and the sight sickened the Baron. He stepped back, evading those clutching hands, while Granette lifted a terror-stricken face upwards.

"I'll do anything, anything!"

"You'll do what I tell you. Go over to that desk, and start writing. I want a confession, in English, that you robbed Archibald Price and put on the Baron's disguise."

Granette did not try to fight. Mannering watched as he wrote quickly, despite his trembling hands. The confession was more comprehensive than he had expected, and there was a deep sense of triumph in his mind as he put it on the table and moved his gun towards Granette.

"I'll use that if you try any tricks again. The moment there's trouble, it will go to Scotland Yard. Keep out of my affairs. Now get out of here."

Granette was trembling all the way to the door, and the Baron watched him disappear along the passage. His face was set as he relocked the door. He grimaced when he saw the mess he was in, and felt suddenly weak.

No one with his throat cut fatally could have looked much worse. The knife had pierced the skin and flesh on the right side and the wound was nearly half an inch deep in the centre. It would not have needed much more pressure to have pierced the jugular: something under split seconds had divided the Baron from death.

As he cleaned up, he knew that he would have to have stitches in the wound. He felt sick, too, stiff and pain-racked, and yet there was no one he *could* approach.

There were Labolle and Gussi!

Mannering dressed as quickly as he could, without putting on a collar and tie, wrapped a scarf loosely round his neck and slipped outside. Jean was not there. It was five o'clock, the darkest hour before dawn, but outside Paris was waking. A taxi came along.

The journey seemed an endless torture, and it seemed an age before Mannering made someone hear him. The cabaret was closed, grey dawn was beginning to spread across the sky.

Mannering leaned against the doorpost and he was drooping forward when the door was opened at last and Gussi's fat figure was outlined against the dim light.

"*Mon Dieu*!" gasped the fat man, and suddenly his arm was about Mannering's waist, steady, comforting. There was no need to think now. "'Ave care, *M'sieu,* 'ave care! *Sapristi,* they 'ave cut your t'roat, *hein?* Lisette, *Lisette*!"

Mannering heard him calling, but he did not see *La Supreme* as she joined her husband, felt nothing as they stretched him on a couch. He was barely conscious when Lisette – *alias La Supreme* – telephoned for a doctor and Gussi tried hard to staunch the bleeding that had started again.

He was conscious of a vague satisfaction that this was not happening at the hotel, and then the small room went dark, seeming to whirl about him. Blackness came, complete and merciful.

At the very moment when a doctor was entering the *Cabaret des Belles Femmes* Jules Granette was talking over the long-distance wire to Jacob Kelworthy, at Hampstead. He spoke guardedly, but gave the names of Wilson and Watson, and the safe deposits where the other two jewels were supposed to be secreted. And: "It will be best for me to visit America now, I think."

"I suppose so," grunted Kelworthy. The news of the failure to get the Crown had depressed him. "Send Lenville back to me."

"I should be careful there," said Granette. "He is fond of the girl Anita."

"That might be useful, very useful," said Kelworthy. "That's good, Granette, perhaps we're not doing so badly. And you told Mannering the Sea of Fire was in my safe, you say?"

"Yes, it was all I could do."

"I'll make sure it isn't there much longer. And we might find something else to put in the safe. I think that's a very good idea. Some kind of electric current, perhaps, enough to make him lose consciousness."

"I think that would be excellent," said Granette.

"Yes, excellent, excellent! Don't forget I want to see Lenville, don't forget! I'm getting a lot of ideas tonight; somehow I think we'll find a way of getting rid of that villain of yours, yes that villain!"

Kelworthy banged the receiver down, completely carried away by his new idea, an idea he would twist and turn until it yielded good results.

Granette was smiling painfully. It was better by far to leave the Baron to Kelworthy, his own nerves needed steadying before he tackled the man again. But he would have the opportunity of resting in America, and after he had secured the Flame Ruby from Van Royton, there would be plenty of time for Mannering. There would be no talking then.

Chapter Nineteen

Rest For The Baron

"But I tell you, Gussi, I *must* get back to the Bristol, and soon."

"*M'sieu Baron,* it is not possible. You are weak, you cannot even stand. I, Gussi, tell you. And *M'sieu le Medecin* say you stay there, t'ree—four days. For your life, it must be!"

Mannering was leaning back on soft white pillows and with a pleasant feeling of laziness but a nasty pain in his neck. He raised his right hand weakly from the coverlet.

"But my friends—"

"Ah! *Vos amis*! Lisette, she go tell them you go away. You visit la Suisse, Lucerne, Menton, *toutes les places, M'sieu*! That is o'-right!"

"It sounds easy," said the Baron, "but I don't know whether it will work. I—Gussi!"

"*M'sieu,* you will be quiet, please. I 'ave two men, you and Benedicte, hurt bad, an' I cannot send him away, I 'ave to look after them. You will talk, talk, talk! It is wrong, *M'sieu.*"

"Gussi," said Mannering quietly, "there's one way out of my troubles, and when you've done that I'll be quiet."

"But, *M'sieu—"*

"Look here," said Mannering irritably, "do you want me to get up and start walking?" He gripped the side of the bed and made as though to get out, but Gussi stopped him, his plump hands gentle but firm.

"You will open the cut, you will bleed to death."

Gussi and the doctor were right: Mannering could no more get up and walk than he could repeat that desperate jump across the balconies. He closed his eyes to steady himself.

"There is a lady – a Mam'selle Fauntley – F-A—" Mannering spelled out Lorna's name carefully. "She is at the Hotel de Lazare, in Paris, or at the Bristol, in Menton. Telephone them, find her and tell her I want to see her urgently in Paris. Give her this address." Each word was an effort.

"*Mais oui, M'sieu, je vais*!"

"And, Gussi. My room—at the Bristol." Mannering was suddenly desperately aware of the room. "Blood everywhere—"

"It shall be clean, it shall be clean!" exclaimed Gussi, as though he was swearing that they should not pass, and before Mannering could speak again he was out of the room. Hazy pictures floated through Mannering's mind; odd, nightmare fancies. He dropped into a sleep that was half-unconsciousness, while outside Lisette was cutting a pyjama jacket into pieces and feeding the fire with them. Mannering had stuffed it into his pockets before he had left the Bristol, and it was stiff with blood.

It was afternoon before Mannering came round again. He opened his eyes, tried to turn his head, but the pain stopped him. A quiet, half-laughing voice came to his ears, and he felt a cool hand on his forehead.

Lorna!

"No tricks, John, they're not allowed today. What on earth have you been doing with yourself?"

"Thank God you're here," breathed Mannering.

He was still silent when Lisette arrived with a bowl of steaming broth. The aroma put new interest into Mannering, and soon he smiled at Lorna with a gleam in his eyes.

"I suppose you're thinking I nearly met my match."

"Good Lord, why? A scratch like that won't hurt you."

"Dear liar," said Mannering, for he could see that Lorna's nerves were stretched to breaking pitch. "Where did Gussi find you?"

"We were still in Paris. I've read about the affair at Panneraude's, and that you got away. Did you get what you wanted?"

"And lost it and found it again," said Mannering. "You might call it an exciting night. Anita de Castilla is at the Bristol, and—good God! That room must be a shambles."

"It's all right," Lorna said. "Lisette has a friend there, a chambermaid. There's no need to worry."

"Bless Lisette," said Mannering. "You should see her dance." After a pause he went on with a change of tone: "Tell Anita to be careful of Lenville, sweetheart."

Five minutes later Lorna left, feeling more worried than she had before, for he was very weak. She went to the Bristol immediately and found Anita in her bedroom, concerned and anxious about Mannering. At sight of Lorna, Anita's eyes lit up.

"Lorna, how good to see you! You know where John—"

"He had an urgent message and has left Paris for a few days," Lorna improvised quickly. "He seemed anxious you should get back to London, to Juan."

"He would!" retorted Anita. "I do not think he likes Teddy."

"He's fond of you, Anita, and I think something that happened yesterday worried him."

"He did not tell you what?"

"No," said Lorna.

"That is like John! You are a lucky woman, Lorna." The *naïveté* was lost in sincerity, and Anita's dark eyes glowed. "What did he say?"

"That he hoped you would go straight back to London. He wants to talk to you about Ted Lenville. Anita, I don't know what it was about, but if this is—just a short trip to Paris with Ted, don't—"

"It was not that!" flashed Anita. "Am I a loose woman? But I am a little fool. I am not ungrateful, Lorna, I will return at once. Teddy has already returned. On the first train, for a friend who is ill or some such. I would have gone, but I was worried about John. You are free for dinner, yes?"

"I'm afraid not," Lorna said, "but I'd love some tea. You'll really go back?"

"It is a promise," said Anita.

It was late that night before Lorna was able to talk to Mannering. He was stronger although his pallor was unusual, and his eyes were unnaturally bright. But he insisted on telling her the whole story.

"And so I've three, Granette still has one and so has Van Royton. I don't see much chance of getting to New York in the near future."

"You'll be in bed another three days, and you have to take it easy for a week or two," said Lorna. "As far as I can understand, you needed five minutes more to bleed to death. You mustn't overdo it."

Mannering eyed her, bitter thoughts chasing one another

through his mind. To be so far on the road to success and then to be hauled back like this was intolerable, but Lorna was right.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't even try."

"Bless you," said Lorna, and she went on brightly: "I've told mother you've had an accident with the foils, and she's going to Menton alone. I'll stay here as long as you need me. You're going on with the search for the five jewels?"

"With three in the bag, it would haunt me the rest of my life if I didn't," said Mannering.

"If Leverson has the Isabella and the Desire Diamond, you've nothing to worry about with them. What are you going to do about this one?" Lorna touched the wallet, where the Crown of Castile was still hidden.

"Take it to a man named Grionde, on the Rue de Platte, will you?" said Mannering. "He's Leverson's recommendation, and there's no need to doubt him. What are the papers saying about the Panneraude job?"

"I'll bring a paper in later. You try to sleep."

In fact, he slept soundly.

Next morning he smiled grimly at the headlines in the French Press about the Baron's outrage; the Baron would soon be as notorious here as in England. The chief longing in his mind during three days in bed was a longing to be in New York. He guessed Granette would defy him, and that the man was probably on the way to Van Royton now. It could not be helped, but—

Mannering spent three more days in Paris, returning to the Bristol on the sixth day after the fight. His leave-taking with Gussi and his wife, as well as Labolle, had been almost tearful. Mannering knew he had three really reliable friends in Paris.

Grionde still had care of the Crown. Mannering had telephoned Flick Leverson and been assured that Grionde was reliable in every way. It was better there than in England for the time being.

Lorna was patient and long-suffering then and during the week in a cottage on the Sussex coast that followed. The Baron chafed at the delay, but on his first day in England a mile walk was as much as he could manage.

But when Flick Leverson came from London, Mannering's

impatience almost gave way.

For the fence had news.

"Granette flew to New York yesterday," he reported. "I imagine you expected that."

"I did," grumbled the Baron, "but I'm no happier at having it confirmed."

"I've warned you about Granette," Leverson said quietly.

"And I appreciate it, Flick. But while Granette and I are still operating there will always be trouble. He isn't likely to accept defeat, although Kelworthy might, and Olling certainly would. Have you see anything of young Lenville?"

Leverson's white hair, ruffling in a soft breeze from the sea, seemed to stand on end. From inside the cottage came Lorna's voice and that of the housekeeper who was preserving the propriety.

"He spends a lot of time with Miss de Castilla and also at Kelworthy's, in Hampstead. I have a feeling they are planning something. Kelworthy might possibly give up, but I class him as dangerous. You are fighting men who are both ruthless and unscrupulous. The type who might well plan to murder you. I am not being melodramatic. You know that."

"I've had some first-hand tuition," said Mannering, and his mouth was set. "Whether I keep working or not the danger is still there. The confession from Granette is enough to keep him worried, and he'll work against me through others."

"Providing you understand the danger, I'm satisfied," said Leverson. "And if you need help, you have only to call on me."

"My personal opinion," said Lorna Fauntley unexpectedly from the doorway, "is that you should both be locked in separate cells, you're living threats to the sanctity of property. Who feels like tea?"

"I'd love some. Then I'll have to be getting back to town," said Leverson.

It was the first time Lorna and Leverson had met, but they took to each other. Yet Lorna was very uneasy. She knew the visit had started Mannering planning in his mind again, and she sensed more of the danger from Granette.

But it was on the following morning that the Baron's patience broke all bounds. For in screaming headlines across the front page of the *Daily Cry* ran the announcement:

THE BARON IN NEW YORK
FAMOUS COLLECTOR
NEW VICTIM RECEIVES SERIOUS KNIFE INJURIES

Mannering read the headlines, then stared ahead of him for several minutes without reading the letterpress. Lorna coming out of the cottage to the garden where he had met the paper-boy, saw his tension and her cheeks paled. From inside the cottage came the voice of the housekeeper, talking of breakfast.

"What is it?" asked Lorna, and Mannering showed her. They stood together, reading how Julian Van Royton, of Long Island, New York, had interrupted a burglar dressed in the familiar dark clothes of the Baron and with a similar mask and gas-pistol. Van Royton had tried to raise the alarm, but the Baron – said the *Daily Cry* – had attacked him with such violence that it was hours before he regained consciousness.

And the Baron had escaped, with fifty thousand pounds' worth of jewels.

"*Here" went on the* Daily Cry, *"is yet another example of the way the Baron is degenerating; of the viciousness of his attacks. Success has gone to his head, murder will follow his raids unless the police of all countries unite to make sure that this menace is caught and made to suffer the severest penalties for his crimes.*

"Among the valuable gems lost by Mr. Van Royton is the famous Venate Ruby and Aris Sapphire – both stones of renown through centuries – and an unnamed ruby which experts declare to be perfect in every detail. It weighs—"

Mannering drew a deep breath.

"So he got it." He paused, then asked irritably: "What the dickens is Sarah yelling about?"

"Breakfast," said Lorna.

"Breakfast's an idea," said Mannering. "Then London, my sweet. We'll see Bristow before lunch. Coming?"

"We'd better hurry," said Lorna, and Mannering actually chuckled as she hurried towards the cottage. She was the one person in this world on whom he could rely never to let him down. She knew there could be no more waiting, no more holding back. He had to fight for the five Jewels of Castilla, for his life, and for the reputation of the Baron.

Chapter Twenty

The Baron Denies

Chief Inspector William Bristow was even more worried these days than he had been during the time the Baron had operated solely in England. He was convinced that Mannering had not robbed Archibald Price at Chelsea, but Mannering had been in France at the time of the Panneraude robbery, and there was good reason to believe that he was now in New York.

Bristow had determined to stop Mannering, but could not bring himself to believe that Mannering would use the violence that had been used on Van Royton.

To make the situation worse, the Assistant-Commissioner, Sir David Ffoulkes, complained without bitterness but with considerable effect that Mannering should never have been allowed to go to France without having a man on his heels, and that Bristow should have known it. Superintendent Lynch came in for a similar reproof. Both men, sitting in the A.C.'s office, were feeling glum. The Baron had been a shadow over their lives for a long time past and he seemed likely to become darker than ever.

Bristow was able to point to his cable to Paris as his chief line of defence. Ffoulkes nodded. He was a youngish, thorough and likeable man, who looked older than he was because of his greying hair and an oddly wrinkled face.

"I suppose you can't be blamed, but it is going too far. I presume there's no doubt that it is Mannering?"

Bristow pointed out Mannering's recent movements.

"Too much for coincidence, I suppose. He must have travelled from Cherbourg, without coming back to England. When was he last seen at the Bristol, in Paris?"

"The night of the Panneraude burglary," said Bristow.

"He's had plenty of time, you see. Of course, there was that fake robbery at Chelsea, but—" Bristow stopped.

Lynch, in the act of lighting a cigar, stopped also, and

Ffoulkes, whose back was to the door, looked up in surprise. He saw them staring towards the door, the astonishment on their faces, and twisted round in his chair. As he did so the door opened more widely, and John Mannering stood there.

He was smiling a little, his tall frame as immaculate as ever in dark grey. He walked slowly towards the desk while a portly and worried sergeant hesitated on the threshold. He had always allowed Mr. Mannering to visit Bristow, but had never dreamed the man would interrupt the Assistant-Commissioner.

Ffoulkes said sharply: "All right, sergeant, close the door and get off. Hallo, Mannering, I hardly expected you."

"Didn't you?" Mannering nodded to Bristow and Lynch. They had doubtless been convinced that Mannering was in New York, yet he could not have come back since the Van Royton burglary, even by jet. "I've been recuperating, and I thought I'd look you up. I'm not interrupting, I hope?"

Ffoulkes drew a deep breath.

He had known Mannering since his schooldays, liked the man and yet agreed with Bristow and Lynch that he might be daring enough to be the Baron. For Mannering to walk in now, completely at ease and nonchalant, seemed to be defiance itself.

"No," said Ffoulkes slowly, "you're not interrupting. It's time you and I had a talk, John."

The Baron looked puzzled as Ffoulkes offered cigarettes.

"Always a pleasure, David, always ready for service." He eyed Bristow and Lynch, and his eyes were gleaming. "I hope you haven't been bitten by the Bristow bug? Find Mannering and you've found the Baron?"

Bristow simply lit a cigarette.

"We won't bandy words," said Ffoulkes, harshly. "We think you're the Baron. You know that well enough."

"To my cost," agreed Mannering. "I'm hoping the *canard* will be scotched after today. Have you seen the newspapers?"

"I have," said Ffoulkes. "And the Baron—"

"Is busy in the United States. I've been in Sussex for the last week. That rather punctures Bristow's pet theory. Doesn't it, Bill?"

"Er," Bristow grunted, and bristled. "I know what it looks like."

"You're still as obstinate as the law, Bill. Well, the Baron is

giving you a tousing, one way and the other. Changing his methods, isn't he, and getting quite violent?"

Ffoulkes waved his hand impatiently.

"John, I don't like this but I'll have to have a complete record of your movements in the past three weeks."

"You won't get it," said the Baron, and he looked almost sorrowfully at Ffoulkes. "You've no grounds at all for asking for it, and if you read the code book you'll know that well. But I'll meet you halfway. I was in Paris until a week ago. In Paris I ran across a man who could use foils better than I, and I was careless about a guard. That," added the Baron, leaning forward and pulling his collar down, "is the result. See it, Bill?"

The scar from Granette's knife was plain enough, although the wound had healed cleanly. All three men regarded it as they would have done the Crown of Castile, before Ffoulkes broke the silence.

"So you've been recuperating."

"With Lorna, a gem of a housekeeper, and the whole village of Listington to bear witness," smiled Mannering. "And the Baron is in New York. This is the first time when circumstances haven't made things look black against me as the Baron."

Bristow's grey eyes met his, in annoyance, anger, but with a hint of relief.

The Baron was here in front of them, proving that he had not been in New York, showing them that the Baron was being impersonated!

Who else would have dared to come here? Would have pushed past the sergeant and into the A.C.'s room on such an errand? Even Ffoulkes, looking at Mannering's face, knew that same reluctant admiration for the Baron as Lynch, Bristow and Detective Sergeant Tring felt from time to time.

"That's fine," said Mannering gently. "Have we had our talk, David, or is there anything else?"

"No," said Ffoulkes, slowly.

"Fine," repeated Mannering. "Then I'll be moving. Oh, Bill, don't be surprised if you get your man for the Price and Van Royton robberies. So long."

He moved so quickly towards the door that they hardly realised he had gone before the door closed. There was a moment's tense silence and then Ffoulkes swore.

“He’s just stringing us,” said Lynch. Nothing disturbed the Superintendent’s coolness of mind, and he sat back in a chair almost hidden by his bulk, dropping half an inch of cigarette ash on his coat lapel. “But he’s proved to my satisfaction that the Baron wasn’t in New York.”

“Which is what he set out to do,” said Ffoulkes.

“I wonder what he meant with that talk of getting our man,” said Bristow. “He knows who’s impersonating him, of course.”

Lynch grunted.

“If he does and it comes to a showdown, there won’t be much left to arrest one way or the other. It’ll be the Baron or the other fellow, and my betting is on the other fellow. Then we’ll have murder on Mannering.”

“He’d prove self-defence,” said Bristow. “I wonder who is doing it?”

Lynch widened his sleepy eyes.

“I wonder where he got that cut throat. The fencing yarn was too thin, no foil would cut like that. And the man in New York used a knife.”

Ffoulkes was listening and staring at Lynch, but it was Bristow who made the only pertinent revelation.

“I only know one good jewel man who handles a knife,” he said, “although I’ve never been able to get anything on him. Granette, of the Kelworthy crowd. I’ll find out if he’s in London. If he’s not, we’ll radio his description to New York. With your permission, sir?”

“Carry on,” said Ffoulkes, “the quicker the better.”

In the next hour Bristow learned that Jules Granette had been out of England for two days, and that during these two days he had been seen in Paris. Bristow felt the glow that always followed a good guess, and cabled Granette’s description, with his known record, to the Police Bureau in New York.

At the same time Mannering was wondering how he could check if Granette was flying back.

He was turning this problem over in his mind that evening when he walked from his flat to the Elan, where he was to dine with Lorna. He had deliberately walked, and he felt thoroughly fit again. The croaking of a newsboy broke his reverie, bringing the gleam to his eyes and the old zest to his mind. He paid for the paper with a sixpence and opened it, standing by Fortnum

and Mason's as he read the *Evening Wire's* report.

IS THE BARON IN ENGLAND? AMAZING LETTER TO "EVENING WIRE"

"*The facsimile printed below, of a sensational letter received this afternoon and purporting to come from the cracksman who has styled himself the Baron, is exactly the same as other letters received in the past, after some of the most stupefying of the Baron's exploits. The 'Evening Wire' believes it to be genuine. If this is so, then someone in France and in America is impersonating the Baron, someone—*"

Mannering chuckled and read through his own letter, printed in block letters and reproduced faithfully as he had written it on the cottage table that morning. It was a brief statement that the Baron had been in England for the past week, that he had never seen Mr. Van Royton, and had not been in America for four years. It also pointed out that he had not been near Chelsea on the night of the burglary at Archibald Price's house.

Mannering knew that nine people out of ten who read it would believe him. Lorna found him absent-minded that night, and they separated just before ten o'clock. Mannering knew that Tanker Tring was on his trail, and he amused himself by giving the sergeant an extra mile walk before he turned into Clarges Street.

At the entrance to the house he stopped, and Tring realised he had been spotted. The sergeant came up slowly, half uncertainly, and with his face set in its usual gloom. He had bought a new bowler, and for once it fitted him without touching his ears.

"You must be tired, Tanker," said the Baron sympathetically. "Coming up for a drink?"

"No, sir, thank you, it's against orders. Are you fully recovered, sir? Mr. Bristow was saying you'd been ill."

"And you've been wishing I would stay like it," said Mannering. "All right, Tanker, give your wife a present." He slipped a five pound note in the astonished Tring's hand, and went off. He was feeling in fine fettle as he put the key in the lock, turned it and pushed open the door.

But he did not close it immediately, for he found himself looking at someone who should not have been there.

The surprise was as great as when Anita had been in his rooms at the Bristol, but there was no risk with the proprieties this time.

Edward Lenville, his light hair ruffled, his pugnacious face flushed, half ran across the room towards him.

"Mannering, I've been waiting hours! Anita—"

"What about Anita?" asked Mannering sharply.

Lenville's lips were quivering.

"It's Kelworthy! At his Hampstead place, and he—he sent me with a message. He gave me the key to your flat. He wants the three gems you've got, or—"

"Or what," said the Baron, and he felt like ice.

"Or Anita will never have them!" cried Lenville. "He says he'll kill her first. You've got to help her, you've *got* to, even if it means giving up those blasted jewels! Mannering, hurry, for God's sake hurry!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Kelworthy Boasts

The Baron stood where he was for perhaps five seconds, and Lenville hated the expression on his face. He could guess some of the thoughts that were passing through Mannering's mind, but Mannering spoke coolly enough.

"Is Anita at Kelworthy's place?"

"Yes."

"Taken by force?"

"No, I wouldn't do that. Kelworthy wanted to see her, and I took her along. She—I—"

"You unspeakable rat," said the Baron very softly. Lenville's pale face, his bright eyes and his ruffled corn-coloured hair seemed a blur to Mannering, yet when his mind cleared he could not credit that this clean-looking youngster could have trapped Anita.

Then an idea flashed into the Baron's mind. He nodded abruptly at the door.

"Get outside and wait there. I'll be down in five minutes. Kelworthy wants me, of course?"

"Yes – but unless you have the stones—"

"What did he tell you about me?"

"Not—not much," muttered Lenville, and Mannering doubted if Kelworthy had been free with the information that he was the Baron. As Lenville left the room the Baron was scowling, but there was a grim smile on his lips when he finished telephoning Flick Leverson.

He found Lenville waiting outside the house, and on the opposite side of the road was Tanker Tring. Mannering waved, took a last cigarette from a packet and tossed it away. Lenville muttered under his breath. Granette and Kelworthy had been right when they had said that he was dangerous. But what the devil was Mannering to do with this?

They reached Piccadilly and Mannering ordered a cabby to go

to Aldgate Pump. Lenville protested with one foot on the running-board.

"But that's a long way round."

"I thought I had to collect something," said Mannering.

He left the cab alone, at Aldgate Pump, and Lenville saw another man approach him, and a small package change hands. The other three diamonds, thought Lenville, and he shivered. Kelworthy was getting his own way, Kelworthy would always get his own way, and the years ahead were bleak for Lenville.

Mannering looked grim when he returned to the cab, and ordered the driver to go to Kelworthy's Hampstead house in Ridersay Drive. Neither he nor Lenville spoke until they reached the carriageway. Mannering paid off the cabby and they walked to the porch.

A maid opened the door, recognised Lenville and stood aside. Lenville led the way to the drawing-room where the Baron had surprised Kelworthy, Granette and Olling three weeks before. Mannering's smile was taut as he opened the door, and saw Kelworthy sitting in his favourite chair, with Olling perched as usual on the couch, his head jutting forward and a cigar poking from the corner of his square mouth.

The tension in the atmosphere of the room was greater than any the Baron had known for a long time past. Yet he seemed to control it, after the maid closed the door. Lenville stood miserably behind him, and Olling produced an automatic pistol. Mannering had expected that.

Kelworthy seemed to be dreaming. He wore the same loose coat, the same baggy morning trousers, and his bony feet were poked into a shapeless pair of slippers.

"You can put that gun away, Olling, this isn't the time to make trouble," Mannering said. "Where's Miss de Castilla?"

"Keep the gun out!" snapped Kelworthy. Mannering saw his watery eyes staring towards him from behind the gold-rimmed pince-nez. "Keep it very steady, we don't want any tricks. Well, *Mister* Mannering"—there was a change in the tone, a cackling note of triumph—"so you're here again? Not quite the happy circumstances of your last visit perhaps."

"I asked for Miss de Castilla!"

Lenville moved into the Baron's sight, and Olling's hand trembled about the butt of his automatic. Mannering wished the

red-faced man's hands were steadier, for automatics were no things to go off by accident.

"My dear Mannering – you didn't believe *that?* How strange, a man of such accomplishments, and yet hoodwinked by a little lie. Lenville must have done it very nicely indeed."

The Baron's eyes blazed as he half-turned towards Lenville. Olling snapped: "Keep still," and the gun trembled even more. Mannering's eyes seemed like fire, but inwardly he was smiling, for the idea he had had at the flat was that Lenville's story was a ruse to get him here. The Baron had decided to oblige.

"You liar – *she's not here*?"

"Certainly not. Abduction is rather a precarious game with Scotland Yard so well-manned," said Kelworthy. "I relied on your chivalry—how well known is your chivalry, Mannering!—to get you here. And Teddy's tongue, of course. He has the making of an excellent con-man. So convincing, under that boyish exterior of his." Kelworthy paused.

"So you won, Kelworthy," said Mannering slowly. "What good will it do you? You won't get anything."

"Won't I?" bellowed Kelworthy, and he stood up for the first time, tall, scraggy, untidy, his arms waving. "Won't I indeed? Olling, keep that gun very steady. Lenville, what happened since you left Mannering's flat?"

Lenville told of the taxi journey and the encounter at Aldgate Pump. Kelworthy was all smiles, and his bony hands were rubbing together.

"Excellent, my boy! So you even brought the stones, Mannering, thinking you could barter them for Miss de Castilla in person. How romantic and quixotic of you! *Hand them over*!"

The change in the tone would have scared most men, but Mannering laughed.

Kelworthy leapt, and Mannering was startled at the strength in that thin frame. A clenched fist swung past Mannering's ear, another caught him on the chin. He went backwards apparently taken off his guard, and Kelworthy stood glaring at him, murder in those watery eyes. This man was as dangerous as Granette.

"The stones, give me the stones!"

Mannering was pressing back towards the wall, apparently scared and uncertain. He put his right hand to his vest pocket, while Olling moved from the settee, making sure that

Mannering was in line with the gun.

Mannering drew out the packet he had taken from Flick Leverson at Aldgate.

Kelworthy snatched it away, Mannering seemed tempted to grab at it, and then drew back. Lenville told himself that even Mannering, in a tight corner, re-acted very much as he himself had done with Kelworthy.

Kelworthy was pressing the envelope, and glaring at the Baron. The three shapes of three precious stones showed against the white. Kelworthy laughed, and the laugh made Lenville shiver.

"We have these three, the fourth is in my safe – oh, what beautiful preparations were made in that safe for you! But Granette made a mess of you, didn't he? And now Granette's got Van Royton's stone, we've got all five, and we can get just what we want from de Castilla. Say half a million. Do you think he can rise to that?"

Mannering said nothing.

Kelworthy dropped back in his chair, Lenville perched himself on the corner of a table, and Olling's hand seemed steadier about his gun.

"You don't feel like talking, Mannering? I can understand it, it must be a great disappointment. But unfortunately you are a reckless fool, you won't be likely to say no to temptation. You'll try again, Mannering, and I can't afford to risk that. You understand?"

Mannering looked for all the world like a man who was terrified.

"What—what are you driving at, you cunning swine?"

"Be careful with that tongue, Mannering. I can make death quick, or slow and painful. You realise, don't you, that I can't take chances? Granette is coming back by ship, and you might arrange to meet him at the port. It would be unfortunate if you managed to get the Flame Ruby, and we had to start over again. I have never liked murder although Granette has never had such scruples. But you had a good run for your money."

Mannering took a half-step forward.

"Kelworthy! You can't—"

"Stay where you are! I can and I'm going to. It will be very easy."

He broke off, for Lenville's lips were twisted, and his eyes were filled with horror.

"Kelworthy! You can't do it!"

"Can't I?" The scraggy man swung round. "You witless fool, you've done most things for me but you're too choosy, far too choosy. Perhaps you think the police will forget? Well, they don't! When Mannering's dead, *you're* an accomplice to murder. For ever afterwards if you try to squeal, if you get fond of a little bitch like Anita de Castilla, you'll remember it isn't wise to defy me."

Mannering heard every word, and yet they hardly seemed to matter. Lenville was standing dead still, his face the colour of chalk, his eyes very bright and feverish. Olling seemed to have gathered confidence in the past ten minutes, and there was an unpleasant grin on his lips. Kelworthy slipped an automatic from his pocket quickly. His gun pointed at Lenville, Olling's at Mannering, and it seemed there was no chance of getting out alive.

Simply because he had thought it possible Anita would be here.

Mannering moistened his lips.

"If abduction's dangerous, Kelworthy, murder is a lot more so."

"Abduction of Anita de Castilla would have been very awkward, Mannering, because I had to keep her alive. The five jewels won't be worth much to the de Castillas without the girl. But murder is different. A body can be hidden."

Mannering's lips tightened and Lenville saw a surprising change in him. Fear seemed to disappear and with it the nervousness. He could see the glint in Mannering's eyes, hear the mocking insolence of his words.

"You poor fool," said Mannering, and Kelworthy's head jerked upwards, his eyes stared at Mannering owlish and unwinking. "Do you think I'm as easy as that? If you kill me, where are you going to get *my* three jewels?"

The silence seemed deadly, and Kelworthy's lips worked, wet and ugly.

"Why—why you—*they're here*!" He jerked the packet forward, but Mannering laughed again.

"Take a look, Kelworthy, take a look!"

Kelworthy tore open the packet, Olling came forward, and a moment later Kelworthy swore viciously. Mannering knew that that moment was more dangerous than ever.

"The Delawney sapphires! You stole them from me, you—"

"I took them from you," said Mannering, "and I've brought them back. I've played you and stalled you and tricked you, now I've broken you."

Kelworthy's hand dropped, the fury in Mannering's words seemed to stagger him. As he stared Mannering moved, taking his life in his hands, knowing that he had worked for just that moment and there would not be another chance. He went forward as Olling swore and heard the soft *hiss!* of a silenced automatic as a bullet pecked into the wall just behind him. Then his clenched fist met Kelworthy's jaw.

Kelworthy's chin seemed to crack, and he was lifted off his feet, flying backwards against a chair and sprawling to the ground. But as the Baron swung round to Olling he saw the murder in the short man's eyes, and the automatic was no more than two yards from his face. Olling's finger was on the trigger and Mannering felt the dark fore-knowledge of death as he went forward.

Something loomed between him and Olling in that split second.

Something knocked at Olling's arm, forcing his hand down, and as the flame came Mannering knew the bullet had hit the carpet. In a haze he saw Lenville, striking at Olling with his left hand, and grabbing at the gun.

Lenville had saved Mannering from death, or at least a serious injury. But it wasn't over yet. Olling lifted his foot and lashed out viciously at Lenville, cracking into the youngster's knee. Lenville gasped and collapsed, and Olling and Mannering started together for the gun on the floor.

Mannering touched it first, but Olling kicked it out of his reach. Olling was like a man possessed. He kicked again at Mannering's head, and Mannering's senses swam.

Then very sharply on the door came a double knock, and *Bristow's* voice was raised.

"Open the door! Open, *in the name of the law*!"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Bristow Makes An Arrest

Mannering had been waiting for the visit. He had deliberately waved to Tring and thrown that cigarette box, with a scribbled word for Tring to take police to Kelworthy's house. He had been sure that Tring would pick up the box.

But Olling had had no warning. The words sent fear through his body, made him stand rigid with his mouth agape, as he stared towards the door. Mannering's mind cleared, and he gripped Olling's left wrist while the other man was still motionless with the shock of surprise. He twisted it upwards and round. Olling gasped and Mannering had him in a half-nelson that could not be broken. Lenville was staring at the door and then at the unconscious Kelworthy, but Mannering was smiling.

"Steady, Lenville." He spoke softly, while the knocking came again and Bristow's voice was raised. "Leave all the talking to me. Put a gun in Kelworthy's pocket and open the door."

Lenville stopped and stared, bewildered and uncertain. "But—the police—"

"Don't waste time!"

Lenville gave up the idea of flight and obeyed. The knocking was thunderous, and as Lenville turned the key and pulled the door open, Bristow and Tanker Tring almost fell into the room. Bristow actually stumbled, and Mannering stretched out a steadying hand. Bristow looked up to see laughing hazel eyes on his.

"Hallo, Bill. You got here, then?"

Bristow stared at Mannering's grip on Olling, and Mannering released the short man's arm. Two plainclothes men stepped forward, and Olling was helpless and scared out of his wits. Kelworthy on the floor, groaned and his eyes flickered.

"What's this?" asked Bristow heavily, looking at the four men and the gun near Olling's feet.

“You’ve no imagination, Bill,” murmured Mannering. “It’s been a rough-and-tumble, and I’m glad you arrived. It might have been murder otherwise. I never did like men with guns.”

Bristow stepped farther into the room, and then he saw the envelope and three stones near Kelworthy’s outstretched hands. He stopped for a moment. In his mind there ran the thought that at last he had Mannering. These jewels were stolen, he was prepared to swear it.

“Watch them, Tring!”

Mannering’s deep chuckle came to his ears as Bristow picked up the sapphires. “Recognise ’em, Bill?”

“I do!” snapped Bristow. “And you’re caught this time. The *Delawney* sapphires—”

“What a mind you’ve got!” murmured Mannering admiringly. “But it’s too tortuous, Bill. You find stolen goods in the hands of Jacob Kelworthy and tell me *I’m* caught red-handed. It wouldn’t even do for a kindergarten, and the defending counsel would suggest you were pensioned off. I didn’t bring the stones here, Bill. Kelworthy tried to *sell* them to me.”

Lenville caught his breath. Bristow stood squarely on his two feet, his voice thick with disbelief.

“Mannering, it won’t work.”

“The truth stands for ever, Bill,” said Mannering. “I came here tonight at Kelworthy’s invitation, to look at some sapphires. Kelworthy hadn’t mentioned which they were, but he knew I collected. I recognised the Delawneys and threatened to fetch the police. The idea didn’t go down well, Kelworthy and his friend Olling – doubtless you’ve heard of the pair – pulled guns. That started the *fracas,* so here’s a job for you. I’m charging Kelworthy and Olling with trying to defraud me by selling stolen gems. Please yourself how you word it. And if you’re going to ask who Lenville is, he’s another prospective buyer who came with me. Fortunately,” added Mannering, looking at Lenville, “because if he hadn’t I might have been badly hurt.” Mannering was smiling very softly. “I promised you an arrest, Bill, and now I fancy Kelworthy is going to wake up. I wonder what he’ll say to the charge?”

Kelworthy was sitting up dazedly. Lenville was doing well, relying on Mannering to get him through, but prepared to help all ways he could. What had Toby Plender said? “If she’s the

type to hold him, she would do him the world of good." The solicitor was probably right.

Kelworthy's eyes cleared suddenly, for he recognised Bristow and Tring. Mannering saw fear in his face and he knew his moment had come. He cut across Bristow's opening words very swiftly: "So you've lost, Kelworthy, and you're for it now. You made a big mistake in trying to sell me stolen gems, and a bigger one pulling a gun. I—"

"That's enough, Mannering!" Bristow was on the *qui vive* for a trick, and he gripped Mannering's arm. Mannering was smiling, but that little pulse in his temple was beating fast.

Had he said enough? Would Kelworthy realise what he was getting at?

Kelworthy was wide awake now, and his eyes were narrowed towards Mannering. He seemed to ignore Bristow, Olling and the others, and when he spoke his voice was as high-pitched as ever.

"I see, Mannering. Well, Bristow, I want my solicitor immediately. Hacking, of Levell, King and Hacking, Water Lane. Olling, keep that damned mouth of yours shut."

Kelworthy got awkwardly to his feet. Bristow swallowed hard, charged him solemnly with being in the possession of stolen goods and repeated the charge to Olling. Neither man said a word about it, and Mannering's smile was beatific.

"Anything else you want me for, Bill?" he asked.

Bristow took him to one side.

"You're playing with fire," he growled.

"Again?" murmured Mannering. "I seem to like fire."

"Kelworthy knows enough to put you in jail!" snapped Bristow. "And he'll talk!"

"You're wrong," said Mannering, "because Kelworthy only guesses, like a policeman friend of mine. And you found the *Delawney* sapphires *here.* When Kelworthy's talked with his solicitor, he'll take the easy way out and admit he had them. He will clear me and Lenville by admitting we came innocently to buy."

Bristow's eyes were smouldering.

"But that gun's been fired!"

"Bill, I think that gun might have gone off by accident. Between you and me, it'll depend a lot on what Mr. Hacking

says tomorrow. But I see you understand."

Bristow reflected bitterly on his way home that he did understand. The *Delawney* sapphires were a plant of Mannering's. For some reason Mannering had deliberately put Kelworthy in the Old Bailey dock, and Mannering's evidence would condemn him. The Baron's evidence!

On the following afternoon Jacob Kelworthy talked with Mr. Hacking, and the solicitor assured him he had just visited John Mannering. Provided Kelworthy and Olling concerned themselves only with the stolen goods charge – and, Mannering had pointed out, to Mr. Hacking's considerable confusion, the Kelworthy syndicate had originally stolen the sapphires so that it was a just accusation – Mannering would prefer no charge of attempted murder. Neither Bristow nor the whole police force could make him. On the other hand, if Kelworthy told the truth, that Mannering had brought the jewels with him, Mannering would explain and the police would gladly take his evidence against Kelworthy on the more serious charge.

"Don't be a fool!" snapped Jacob Kelworthy. "He's got us where he wants us. We'll take the rap for receiving, with luck we won't get more than a year. Tell Olling."

"Olling asked me to tell you it was his feeling, too," said the unhappy Mr. Hacking. "But there is another thing."

"Well, out with it!"

"The—er—the Sea of Fire, some emerald or other, Mannering wants it."

Kelworthy was dead silent for a moment, and his features twisted viciously. He was just seeing how thoroughly the Baron had beaten him.

But if he had shot Mannering, and the police had arrived as they had—

"You know where it is," snapped Kelworthy. "Send it."

"Very well," said Mr. Hacking. "You will plead not guilty, of course."

"Get us a good counsel," said Kelworthy. "And word must be sent to Granette at once."

"I sent a coded radiogram to Granette as soon as I heard what had happened," said Hacking, who had peculiar habits for a solicitor. "He will look after himself – and he'll go for Mannering."

"That's just what I'm hoping," said Jacob Kelworthy softly. "That's just what I'm hoping. With Mannering dead, I would gladly serve three years and enjoy it. And Granette will be very angry about the Sea of Fire, won't he, Hacking?"

John Mannering and Edward Lenville, in Mannering's Clarges Street flat, looked down at the four stones spread out on the desk. After two days Lenville had hardly recovered from his surprise at knowing Mannering was the Baron, but Mannering knew that Lenville would not talk. Lenville's gratitude had become a little wearying, but the Baron had countered and silenced it by pointing out that his jump at Olling had saved his life.

With the threat of Kelworthy gone, and his whole future altered, Lenville now faced uncomfortable facts. John Mannering was the Baron, and in front of Mannering were four of the five Jewels of Castilla – the gems that seemed to be part of Anita de Castilla's life.

"And you're wondering how I can face Anita and still have these?" Mannering said. "It's simple, Ted. I'm getting them *for* Anita."

"Good *God*!" gasped Lenville.

"Don Manuel de Castilla had them stolen and he's offered a hundred thousand to get them back. Had Kelworthy got them they would have cost him twice as much, but we needn't go into that. Without the Baron, although I say it myself, Kelworthy would have had the stones. It's not so difficult to see now?"

"No," said Lenville, and Mannering laughed.

"That's good. And because the Baron is bursting with money these days and is getting quite quixotic, I'm thinking of selling these four to de Castilla, and giving Anita the Flame Ruby."

"*Giving* it!" exclaimed Lenville. He stopped and stared. "But Granette's still got it, man!"

"These will be looked after until I've collected it." Mannering picked up one stone after another and looked at them intently. The Isabella Diamond, and the Diamond of Desire, had come only an hour before from Leverson, for the Baron had wanted all the stones together. *M'sieu* Grionde, of Paris had sent the Crown of Castile over by air, on the previous evening, while by devious routes the Sea of Fire, green and lambent and worthy of

its name, had come from Mr. Hacking to the Baron.

Mannering slipped the stones into a case, ready to send back to Leverson.

"You look after Anita," he said. "There's no need to tell her the truth, and remember you helped to get her diamonds for her. I've an idea that Anita, once she gets the Castilla jewels back, will be ready to think over other things. I'm told you've an income of three or four thousand from capital you can't touch."

"How the devil do you get this information?" asked Lenville awkwardly.

"Little birds," said Mannering cheerfully. He stood up, gripping Lenville's shoulder. "Make yourself scarce, Ted, I've a lot to do. Granette reaches Cherbourg on the *Orientes* tomorrow. You know your job?"

"I'll be there," promised Lenville.

After he had left the flat, Mannering packed enough clothes for another short holiday. This time he made greater preparations than before.

At dusk that night a tall, hazel-eyed man clad in a dark, long mackintosh left Folkestone station, looked about him to make sure he was not followed, and beamed. But it was not the flashing smile of John Mannering; not even Lorna would have recognised him.

His teeth, covered with that thin rubber, looked discoloured and ugly, his cheeks, thanks to the pads, looked much fatter, and greasepaint had worked wonders with the lines about his eyes and mouth. His hair was grey at the sides, and he looked fatter round the waist than Mannering by at least three inches. Moreover, he walked with a stoop, thus taking inches off his height.

But it was the Baron who walked briskly towards the night boat to Boulogne, the Baron who showed a passport at the passport cabin under the name of Mr. James L. Miller, the Baron who stepped off at Boulogne and had a blue-jacketed porter take his luggage quickly to the customs, magically clearing them before anyone else from the crowded boat and getting a corner seat in the Paris train.

And it was the Baron, or Mr. Miller, who left the train at Etaples, confounded the black soot that had collected on the

hand rail at the carriage exit, shook his head vigorously when a fat porter came for his baggage – a simple suitcase – and walked quickly along the low platform of the station. Outside a racy-looking Renault was waiting, and in it a man who came from *M'sieu* Grionde, of Paris. Leverson had arranged it expertly.

Mannering transferred a roll of tools from the Frenchman's case to his own, and took over the Renault after paying the driver well. He was driving through the night along the unfamiliar French roads, for the *Orientes* was due at Cherbourg before midday and Mannering proposed to sail on it for Southampton.

The biggest question in "Mr. Miller's" mind was whether Granette would recognise him as Mannering. He did not think so, but he was sure that Granette would guard the Flame Ruby jealously, and that once Granette realised the Baron was on board he would shoot first and talk afterwards.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The Reckoning

The hustle and bustle on board the *Orientes* at Cherbourg as the short-distance passengers embarked and the last of the luggage and mails were unloaded, was pleasant to the Baron's eyes. It was a perfect morning, warmer than in England, and with the sun shining from a cloudless sky. The *Orientes* was an English ship, with the indefinable suggestion of home that was always aboard British liners.

Mannering had passed through without the slightest trouble, and in his cabin – Leverson had booked it – were all the tools he might need. But he knew that apart from the danger from Granette it would be difficult to get away if there was open trouble.

A brief visit to the purser's office, ostensibly to find if any friends were on board, satisfied him that Granette had embarked under an assumed name.

The trip from Cherbourg to Southampton should take no more than four hours; in that four hours the Flame Ruby must change hands, which meant he was very tight for time. Mannering studied the people on the first-class deck carefully. If Granette was there he was better disguised than Mannering had expected. He could stand failure, but a fruitless journey altogether would be more than he could take.

But Granette *might* be travelling cabin or tourist class.

Mannering's knowledge of the man's fastidiousness did not make it seem likely, but Granette would be aware of the possibility of a watch for him.

And then Mannering stood very still, as an idea flashed through his mind.

Had Granette left the ship at Cherbourg?

Mannering, or Mr. Miller, was breathing very hard as he walked round the promenade again. A party of young Americans were having a final fling on the games deck above,

and Mannering walked up the companionway, fighting against a conviction that the luck had turned against him.

He was at the top of the companionway when he saw Granette.

He knew the man in a flash, although Granette's disguise was really good; but Mannering saw him smile; that crooked, malicious smile would have given Granette away anywhere. He was staring towards the disappearing coast of France, and in his hand was a letter picked up at Cherbourg.

Probably from Mr. Hacking, thought the Baron.

All the Baron's confidence was back, and he walked past Granette without a pause. Granette's skin was much sallower than usual, he was following Mannering's example with cheek pads, and he affected a long, waxed moustache. His dress was definitely French provincial, his hair was long, and he had the affected manner – his acting was superb, for even motionless he created the effect – of the eccentric.

In his guise Granette had been quite a celebrity on board the *Orientes,* Mannering imagined as he walked past. Granette glanced at him; past him.

A little man in a spotless white jacket came hurrying past, and Mannering saw Granette in the distance, his back towards them. "Steward!"

"Yes, sir." The man paused.

"That gentleman along there – I seem to recognise him. Don't want to make a damn fool mistake. D'you know his name?"

The steward glanced along the deck to see the figure of the eccentric *M'sieu* Digonne who had proved generous on board and a surprisingly heavy drinker of whisky and soda.

"That's Moosoo Digonne, sir."

"Digonne, Digonne?" Mannering repeated the name, and shook his head. "Not my man, not my man. All right, steward, thank you."

Silver changed hands, the little steward walked past "Moosoo Digonne", and Mannering paid another visit to the purser's office. There was a Hugo Digonne in one of the outer cabins on A deck, a double cabin which had had only one occupant during the trip. Mannering had reserved a cabin on A deck, but it was badly placed for getting at Number 8 – Granette's, or Hugo Digonne's – apartments.

Itching to be working, Mannering was tempted to visit the cabin immediately, but he forced the temptation back. Lunch would be early and Granette would probably take it. At eleven-thirty Mannering ensconced himself in the dining-saloon, and at eleven forty-five "Moosoo Digonne" arrived, glancing about him and sitting down at a table some distance from Mannering.

The waiter who was bringing roast beef to Mannering's table saw the tall, portly man gulp and lean back in his chair. Mannering looked up at him, and his lips were pressed very tightly together. He made one effort to speak and then gave it up, rushing headlong from the saloon. The waiter shrugged, used to those antics.

"'E got it early," he said, and on the far side of the saloon Granette told himself that any man who was seasick at that stage in the journey should avoid boats. Granette was in a more vicious mood than ever, for the report of Kelworthy's capture and the Baron's possession of the four stones brought him to a pitch of livid fury. Twice he had tried to kill the Baron: it would be his first job when he reached England and had put the Flame Ruby safely away. Granette went on with his soup.

Mannering reached A deck and walked up and down, towards the passages and the companionways. No one was in sight, and he could hear no talking in the cabins excepting in Number 24, well removed from Granette's Number 8.

He stepped swiftly to the door of Number 8. It was locked, so Mannering slipped a pick-lock from his pocket, twisting it quickly and expertly. The seconds seemed to drag, and again there was the ever-present knowledge that a single slip on board would be the end. He could not make a run for it; whoever saw him would recognise him as Mr. Miller, and he would be revealed as Mannering before he left the ship.

Mannering's heart was hammering as the pick-lock found its groove and the lock clicked back. He entered quickly, with a last glance in either direction. The white jacket of a steward appeared round a corner. Mannering stopped by the door, but the man's footsteps passed.

Mannering stood on the threshold of Granette's cabin.

It was a spacious, two-roomed apartment, and Mannering hesitated for a fraction of a second before he slipped into the bedroom. He started work quickly, opening all the drawers and

going through them methodically, replacing the contents as well as he could. Nothing came to hand, but Granette was away for at least half an hour, and he had good time.

At the end of twenty minutes the Baron had opened everything in the rooms, but for a small drawer in the top of the dressing-table. It was locked, and none of the keys lying on the robette had fitted it. Mannering turned back to it, his pick-lock at hand again, and the lock opened quickly.

He pulled out the drawer, not knowing whether to expect the best. Would Granette keep the ruby there?

Mannering laughed, even against himself.

Spirit gum, greasepaint, and mascara, with other oddments, were in the drawer. Granette needed his make-up daily, and he locked the impedimenta away. If he locked up lipstick what would he do with the ruby? Mannering stood back, without pushing the drawer. He was reasonably confident that the ruby was not in the cabin, unless Granette had prised up a board. That was difficult here, unlike a house, where he could do what he liked.

Then he heard the handle of the door turn.

The footsteps had come softly, but he had fancied they had gone past Number 8. Now he darted aside swiftly and noiselessly, and he was behind the door when it opened.

Granette, or "Moosoo Digonne", stepped quietly into the cabin and half-turned to push the door. As he turned he saw something move, saw someone standing against the green-painted walls of the cabin. He stood there with the door wide open, his lips agape and incredulity in his eyes at the sight of Mr. James L. Miller, who had a gun in his right hand.

"Close the door," said the Baron softly.

He did not try to disguise his voice, and knew that Granette had recognised him from it.

"*Nom de Dieu – le Baron*!"

"Close the door," repeated Mannering, and Granette backed stiffly towards the door, closing it as he went. There was no play-acting about his manner now.

The door closed, while Granette stood with his hand on the handle. Slowly his colour came back to normal, a light that was not just fear and stupefaction showed in his eyes.

"Getting back to normal, are you, Granette?" Mannering said.

“Perhaps you’ll remember what happened in Paris?”

“In—Paris.” The words were a sigh.

“With your knife,” said the Baron very softly, and he pointed to the red scar just below his collar. “That was very nearly the end for me, Granette. I was as close then as you are now.”

“No—*no*!” gasped Granette.

“I told you once before, it’s not so nice when you’re the victim,” said the Baron, and his gun hand moved. “I’ve come for you, and I’m going to get you. Kelworthy is waiting trial, with Olling, and they’ll get a lighter sentence than they deserve for one good reason. They kept quiet when I told them to, and they gave me the Sea of Fire. Does that make sense?”

Granette seemed like a figure carved from stone, and now the Baron was wondering what was in the other’s mind, was sure Granette would not give way as easily as it seemed. Yet the man was cornered, it was easy to believe that he was a coward at heart.

“You want—the ruby?”

“What a quick mind you have,” congratulated the Baron. “Yes, I want the ruby. Where is it?”

His tone hardened again, and he took a half-step towards Granette. The Frenchman shivered, and his right hand moved slowly towards his vest pocket. Mannering stopped him.

“Take your coat and vest off,” said the Baron, “and spread them out on that couch.”

The glitter in Granette’s eyes told him that he had stopped the man going for his knife. Keeping the gun trained on Granette, he felt the pockets of the coat and vest. There was a gun, a knife of the stiletto type – perhaps the brother to that which had all but cut Mannering’s throat – but there were no precious stones. Certainly the Flame Ruby, the last of the five Jewels of Castilla, was not there.

Granette was not acting the coward now, and there was something in his attitude that made the Baron very wary. His first look of shock, of fear, at his unexpected discovery of the Baron, seemed now to be mingled with one of a certain defiant triumph.

“You’re a fool to try and put anything across me,” Mannering said. “Remember I’ve an excellent plea of self-defence if there should be an accident. I’m not fooling.”

"Aren't you?" Granette sneered, and in the disguise he looked sinister, unreal, a strange caricature of Jules Granette. "Then try it, Mannering. Kill me if you want to – and *then* try and find the ruby."

"*Where is it*?"

"An interesting point," said Granette, and he was at his best now, the battle was of words and wits, but the Baron knew that the moment would come when Granette would refuse to obey, despite the threat of the gun.

Mannering dared not shoot, to wound or kill, on board the *Orientes.* That was a simple fact, and Granette knew it. He was smiling thinly, and he moved towards the table for cigarettes.

"What you call check, *hein*? What are you going to do, Mannering?"

"It's easy," Mannering said. "I'm going to tell the Captain that I've recognised you as Granette, and that you're wanted for the Van Royton robbery. He won't believe me, but he'll phone Scotland Yard. The Yard knows that you impersonated me at Chelsea, knows that you, not I, was in New York. Kelworthy is a prisoner and Olling an easy talker. What now?"

Granette moved.

The Baron had never seen a man move so fast. He could not follow the jerk from the wrist to the waistband, but he saw the knife that leapt to Granette's hand, while he was still two yards from the Frenchman. He moved his left hand upwards, with the revolver as the knife hummed towards his chest. There was a sharp, stinging pain as the blade cut through Mannering's wrist. For a second his fingers seemed nerveless and the gun dropped with a clatter to the floor.

Mannering shot out his right and forced Granette back, but the Frenchman stopped and grabbed the knife from the floor as he went. Mannering was by the bed, his left wrist bleeding freely and the other knife was close to his right hand.

Granette did not throw the stiletto this time. If he missed he would be weaponless. He came forward, the knife upraised, and it was obvious that he was prepared to take a chance of getting away with murder. Mannering's right fingers closed about the hilt of the dagger, and he jumped backwards. That downward sweep missed, but Granette twisted round like an eel. Mannering saw the knife come again and knew that he would

have to fight knife to knife. Laporte's face floated in front of his mind, and odd fragments of all he had ever learned of sword and dagger play.

His knife went up towards Granette's, steel slid along steel and the two knives locked at the short handles. Mannering felt the hot breath on his face, felt Granette moving his leg to knee him, for they were pressed closely together. Mannering forced the other away. He needed a breather, and kept back, with Granette bobbing and weaving, the knife thrusting forward and Mannering's going out to meet it.

Granette rushed in, and the knife flashed past Mannering's guard. Mannering twisted round and the knife sliced through his coat and shirt: but for a moment Granette was helpless. Mannering swung his point towards Granette's neck. Whatever happened he could not kill the man, he was fighting a different type of battle, but he could frighten Granette.

His knife point touched Granette's fingers near the handle of the knife. Granette gasped and the knife went whirling through the air, cracking against the wall and dropping back within a yard of Mannering's foot.

He stamped on it, breaking the steel into a dozen pieces; then he took a step back, breathing hard, but smiling, with Granette opposite him, helpless without his knife, and swaying to and fro on his feet. His fingers were hardly scratched.

Mannering hardly saw the Frenchman.

He had glanced down at the pieces of steel, seeing that the handle was broken as well as the blade. And he saw something else, a stone that glinted dull red in the sunlight streaming through the porthole.

The Flame Ruby!

Granette had hidden it in the handle of the knife; the one place where it must have seemed safe. But now the Baron stood there with Granette helpless and afraid, with the ruby within his grasp, the whole affair at an end as far as he could see, for he had the five jewels and there was nothing else to do; Granette would not dare to tell the police.

But the knock that came suddenly, urgently, on the cabin door jerked the Baron out of the excitement that had followed the discovery of the Flame. A steward's voice came, high-pitched and urgent.

“Are you all right, sir? Are you all right?”

Mannering saw the glitter in Granette’s eyes, and for a moment he thought Granette was going to make a mad rush at him. But the Frenchman stood quite still.

“No—*no*!” The words came too quickly for Mannering to stop them. “I am robbed—the *Baron*!”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Touch And Go

There was a startled silence in the passage outside, then the steward's voice was raised in alarm, while Granette stood glaring. Mannering was poised with his right foot an inch from the Flame Ruby and staring at the Frenchman.

"So clever," sneered Granette. "We will both get the sentence, eh, Mannering? Did you think I would let you win?"

Thoughts flashed through the Baron's mind. Granette had beaten him; when the cabin door was forced open he was finished – finished, the Baron was smashed. His disguise would be useless, for Bristow would be waiting at Southampton, summoned by radio. Lorna, Anita, Juan de Castilla – dozens of others seemed to flit across Mannering's mind, and he felt incapable of moving or speaking.

Granette was still sneering, and the steward was thundering on the cabin door, footsteps echoed along the passage and someone was shouting: "Bring a key—I haven't got mine—bring a key!"

"Your last moment of freedom," said Granette very slowly.

It was then that the idea flashed into the Baron's mind.

He knew that he *could* make it succeed, and he did two things almost at the same time. Granette saw him step forward, but could not dodge the terrific upper-cut Mannering rammed to his point, Granette reared upwards and was falling as Mannering reached the cabin door. He heard the key slide in the lock as he hauled a heavy chair and jammed it against the door. That was barricade enough for what he wanted, and he swung back towards Granette, dipping his hand into his breast pocket. His blue silk scarf fluttered from his fingers, a scarf similar to Granette's.

Granette was getting to his feet, whimpering a little, and Mannering raised his voice to drown the sounds.

"Hurry—*hurry*!"

He hit Granette again, mercilessly beneath the chin. Granette groaned once and then dropped down, consciousness gone. Mannering heard the stewards pounding at the door as he whipped the scarf about Granette's neck and knotted it.

He would get through!

He pulled the other tools from his pockets, the equipment he had used for searching the cabin, and pushed them into Granette's trousers' pocket. The door was opening a fraction, but the chair had caught in the edge of the carpet and there was not enough room for a man to get through.

The Baron bent down, grabbing the ruby and the pieces of the broken blade – all close to Granette's body – talking all the time, like a man in delirium.

"Hurry—he's killing me—he—"

Men were swearing at the door, other footsteps were racing. Someone said: "Steady there, steady," and then the door sagged. Mannering stopped still, dropping the broken pieces near Granette. Granette, with Mannering's knife in his right hand, with the blue silk scarf he had used to impersonate the Baron, and the tools in his pocket.

"I—thought—he'd—got—me!" gasped Mannering. He stared from the second officer to the cut on his wrist, where the blood was still welling. "Find me a drink, steward."

"Hurry, Wyman!" ordered the second officer.

A steward swung round, pressing through the crowd gathered in the corridor. The officer, a middle-aged man with a leathery face and gold-crowned teeth, looked anxiously at Mannering.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Yes. He—"

The second officer bent over Granette, saw his swollen lips moving a little and stood up.

"It's the Baron all right," he said. "Unless it's that fellow who's impersonating him. You certainly clouted the swine! But this won't do, I must report. Exactly what happened, sir?"

Mannering pushed his hand through his hair, and stared dazedly at the officer.

"Can I—clear my head first? It was pretty dreadful. I didn't dream—" He was telling himself that after that second blow Granette would be unconscious for at least ten minutes, perhaps for twenty, and he had decided on his story. He had it pat by

the time the whisky had arrived.

"This man – I thought I knew him – asked me to see him after lunch. I—I hadn't eaten well," said Mannering, and he blessed the fact that there was corroborative evidence that he *had* been seasick, and *had* imagined he knew Digonne. "I came down here and waited in his cabin. He had given me permission, for the only cabin I could get was on the port side. I never liked—"

"I understand," said the officer. "And then?"

"Obviously he didn't expect me to be here," said Mannering. "I was dozing, and when I woke up I was astonished to see the man with the mask on – the Baron! I cried out in surprise, and he came at me with the knife and—well, I thought he had finished me, I really did." Mr. Miller eased his neck and a dozen sympathetic eyes were turned towards him. "I shouted, and your men alarmed him. He was off his guard for a moment, and I hit out for all I was worth. I hope it wasn't too hard."

"He's not dead," said the officer. "He'll be ready for the Old Bailey. I must report to the Captain at once, of course, and he will want to see you before you go ashore. Wyman, send for Dr. Spendow, and have three men in this cabin until I come back."

"Yes, sir, certainly."

Mannering started.

"Did you say ashore?"

"We're berthing now, sir," said the other. "Will you wait in this cabin?"

"In my own, in my own, please," said Mannering. "Of course I'll wait. Number 20, I think, or 21. What about this—this fellow?"

"I've given orders about him, sir," said the officer patiently. He escorted Mannering along the corridor to the door of Number 20. Stewards kept curious passengers away, and Mannering saw with relief that only a steward was with them. The gold-crowned teeth flashed and gave an order.

"Smith, wait here for me, and don't let anyone go in. You'll be all right, Mr. Miller?"

"Thank you, thank you!" said Mannering.

He locked the door – and then began to move. He reached the bathroom, slipping the cheek pads out, and the rubber off his teeth. Mannering, not Miller, was appearing. He scrubbed his hair violently, getting most of the grey off, working desperately

and tensely. In five minutes John Mannering stood there, upright, well-groomed, debonair, forcing himself to act his part even without an audience.

He opened the door silently.

He saw the back of the faithful Smith – placed there, he guessed, to make sure Mr. Miller did not try to make himself scarce. One steward had seemed enough for Mr. Miller. Mannering took a step forward, rapping a rabbit's punch to the steward's neck as the man half-turned. A single short cry came as Smith dropped down. Mannering dragged him into the cabin, and even then he showed one of those mad, quixotic impulses typical of the Baron. He slipped his wallet out and pushed a five pound note between the steward's neck and collar, spending precious seconds that might bring disaster. But the corridor was empty as he went out and closed the door.

He was at the foot of the nearest companionway when he saw the sympathetic officer turning the corner from the deck, with the short, red-faced Commander of the *Orientes.*

Mannering's heart thudded, his hands were clenched.

Would he be recognised?

He could not turn back without raising suspicions, he had to face this out, but as they approached and he waited for them, lighting a cigarette to hide his face, he felt like turning and rushing away.

Both men glanced at him and passed by.

Mannering felt the perspiration on his forehead, but his heart was light, triumph was in his mind as he went on, with the mad refrain in his mind that he was through, he had won!

He mingled with the crowd pressing towards the gangways and the quayside, all anxious to get a comfortable seat on the train to Waterloo, although Mannering's objective was not London. In the hustle and bustle of the liner's arrival Southampton Docks was a friendly place, familiar and welcome to the Baron. He had his own passport, and there was nothing to hinder his progress.

He was on the station platform when the shock came.

He had not dreamed of trouble, until he saw Chief Inspector William Bristow walking there. *Bristow,* here!

Mannering was very close to panic, for Bristow seemed to be making straight for him, but he slipped behind a pillar and a

crowd of waiting passengers as Bristow came up. The Chief Inspector turned towards the docks, with Sergeant Tanker Tring close behind him.

Mannering did not breathe freely until the two were out of sight. He guessed what had brought them: word had been wirelessed the moment there was talk of the Baron on board the *Orientes,* and Bristow had come down without a moment's delay.

But how had he had time?

Chief Inspector William Bristow, as it happened, had decided that the *Orientes* was the most likely ship to carry the passenger with the Flame Ruby from New York, and he had come down to meet the liner. As he passed Mannering he was fuming at the delay, for his train had been twenty minutes late. When he reached the Custom's shed one of the look-out men from the Yard approached him quickly.

"'Morning, Mr. Bristow, you can smell it, can't you? You've heard?"

"Heard what, man?" Bristow glared.

"There's been a schemozzle on board, and they reckon they've got the Baron."

The dock detective did not finish, for Bristow was already hurrying towards the liner. He had no trouble to get aboard, and none in finding a steward to lead him to Cabin 8, where the Commander, two subordinates and the ship's surgeon had been gathered for the past twenty minutes. Another steward outside the door glanced at Bristow's card and admitted him promptly. Bristow stepped in, prepared to see John Mannering.

He saw a man on the couch whom he did not recognise, although he learned very soon it was Jules Granette. The ship's officers all looked grimmer than this occasion seemed to warrant. Bristow stepped forward briskly, recognising the Commander.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

Then Bristow stopped.

He was looking at the man on the couch, and something there seemed to fascinate him. The man's lips were not moving and he seemed unnaturally still. Bristow's eyes flashed to the surgeon, and the man nodded abruptly.

"I'm afraid so, Inspector. There was a fight, as you've

probably heard, and this man was knocked out. He fell on a piece of broken knife that was sticking in the carpet, and it pierced through his back to the heart. He lived for ten minutes or so, but—"

Bristow was feeling very cold.

"And—is this supposed to be the Baron?"

"Yes, he—"

"Where is the other man?" demanded Bristow.

Ten minutes later he had the whole story, but neither the leather-faced officer nor the Commander had seen Mannering enough to be able to offer anything of a description. But Bristow believed it had been Mannering, and not a portly gentleman named Miller. The wires were soon humming, and word went out to pick Mannering up when he reached Waterloo, and for men to wait at the Clarges Street flat.

There was a real chance of getting him this time.

But as the boat train drew into Waterloo, with the police watching the barriers for John Mannering, the Baron was sitting in the cottage near Listington, with Lorna lazing in a hammock nearby and Ted Lenville standing and looking down on the older man incredulously.

"So you got them *all,* Mannering? Every damned stone!"

"Oh, he's remarkably clever," said Lorna sleepily. "He might get killed one day, but that won't worry him, for he has the luck of the devil."

"We're getting to know each other too well," smiled Mannering. "What time did you get here?"

"I was here all night," said Lorna.

"I arrived just after seven," said Lenville. "Is that all right?"

"You are both able to offer evidence that I've been here since seven o'clock, even at some risk to Lorna's reputation."

"You took that years ago," Lorna said.

"Call it luck if you like," said Lenville, "I think it's damned clever. They can't prove you were on board the *Orientes,* even if any of the passengers thought they saw you coming off."

"Didn't I tell you how clever he was," murmured Lorna.

Some time later they realised the narrowness of the Baron's escape. Had he been unable to "prove" his presence at the cottage, there would have been a more serious charge than burglary and housebreaking to face. But Bristow found himself

against a brick wall again, for Lenville was as loyal as Lorna Fauntley.

"And after all," said Mannering to Bristow on the following day, "Granette isn't the type of man who ought to be around, Bill. Try and ease your conscience with that and forget to look for the man who killed him."

Don Manuel y Alverez de Castilla, tall, white-haired and with the dignity and courtesy of a century before, looked tolerantly at Anita, who was happy and excited that night, the five jewels almost forgotten in a sudden discovery that Ted Lenville was no longer a tongue-tied and rather hesitant young man. She asked for no explanation, and Lenville felt remarkably happy. Juan de Castilla was a little subdued, but Mannering and Lorna Fauntley were in spirits high enough even to make Don Manuel start laughing.

It was over the dessert that Mannering first broached the subject of the five Jewels of Castilla.

He did so quickly, and abruptly, anxious to see the Don's reaction, but his smile was lazy, his voice casual.

"You've learned that the Baron is after the Castilla jewels, Don Manuel. Or hasn't Anita told you?"

The old man's eyes sparkled suddenly, and Mannering could sense his anger.

"She has not spoken, Mr. Mannering. But I read the papers, and I understand. First Price, then Salmonson, then Van Royton. This man is getting the five jewels that mean so much to us. And then, I doubt not, he will sell to the highest market. That is your belief?"

"It's pretty close," said Mannering. Lorna felt that she wanted to scream, Lenville wondered whether Mannering would go too far, Anita, Juan and Don Manuel were thinking only of the Crown of Castilla, those five precious gems.

"I don't know, though, the Baron's a funny customer, if he has them he might come to you—"

Don Manuel shrugged his shoulders.

"It is doubtful, I think."

"You mean he won't expect you to buy?"

"Perhaps not," said Don Manuel, and then Anita interrupted, as the Baron had hoped.

"But, John, if only he would offer them here! No one need know they are the separate jewels that have been stolen, need they? In the setting, in the Castilla Crown, they are themselves, they are *ours."*

"Perhaps your father doesn't think like that," said Mannering. "He may think Van Royton and others bought them in good faith."

There was a momentary silence before the Spaniard drew a deep breath.

"I have not heard that the Castilla Jewels have been stolen except from me," said Don Manuel y Alvarez de Castilla softly. "Certain similar stones, yes, but who is to know they are the same? I made an offer to buy them back at twenty thousand pounds for each stone. I would ask no questions not even of the Baron. In addition, I would perhaps indemnify those men who have lost their jewels—"

Mannering laughed.

"If they ever came your way, I hope you wouldn't, Don Manuel. The insurance companies will have done that job. The buyers – Panneraude, Van Royton and the others, all knew they'd bought stolen goods. Some charity would be far better off with a gift. But good Lord, we're almost being serious! Anita, I can see you're dying to dance."

"I will rest up here," said Don Manuel quietly, "and perhaps you will spare me ten minutes a little later, Mr. Mannering?"

Mannering went to the de Castilla suite half an hour later, to find Don Manuel sitting in an easy chair with a cigar between his fingers.

"Don't get up," said Mannering, pulling a chair near the Don's. "You wanted me?"

"I wanted to tell you," said Don Manuel y Alvarez de Castilla, "that I believe I understand. You are—an emissary of the Baron on some matters?"

Mannering's eyes were glowing.

"I don't know who the Baron is," he said, "but he once rendered me a considerable service. Whenever I can, I like to help him. Provided he can rely on you to keep the five stones for Anita, I think you will be soon getting an offer. Of course your silence is a condition."

"For Anita," said Don Manuel slowly. "Who else should I even

think of? Sometimes I think I am getting too old, Mannering, for there was a time when I could have admired the Baron even more perhaps than I do now. As for silence – we shall keep the five Jewels of Castilla in their setting, hidden from all but the closest friends. No one who knows their description as single gems will ever recognise them together. Some people would say perhaps that it is dishonest, but the Baron would not."

"I don't think he would, knowing Anita. When the offer comes, Don Manuel, you will send a cheque to the address the Baron will give, and another to that charity. The Baron will ask ten thousand for each stone, Don Manuel. Your price was twenty."

"That is very generous," said de Castilla. He leaned forward, and their hands were together as there came sharp, running footsteps in the passage. The door was flung open violently, and Anita stood there; a breathless, wild-eyed Anita with a flaming red ruby in her hand.

"Father – it is impossible, but look—the Flame! The *Flame*! It has come, a messenger brought it to me. I almost fainted and then I rushed up here!"

She paused for breath. The old man smiled at Mannering, but before either of them could speak Juan came hurrying. Juan, with his dark eyes angry and his fists clenched.

"Anita, you little idiot, why did you rush off like that? It was a sensation, people are talking even now. Lorna dancing with Ted, too."

"The Flame!" said Anita simply.

The Baron saw his expression of disbelief, then saw the exultation in his eyes, the surging happiness in Anita's, and the contentment in the Don's. He knew then that the five Jewels of Castilla were more than precious stones.

He slipped outside, closing the door quietly as Lenville and Lorna came along. Lenville was looking worried, laughter was lurking in Lorna's eyes.

"I shouldn't go in at the moment," advised Mannering. "Someone sent Anita the Flame Ruby, and I believe the Baron has made Don Manuel a proposal. It's surprising how many amoral folk there are in the world. Your prospective father-in-law, Ted, might almost be called an accessory after the fact."

"You mean he's bought the others?" Lenville demanded.

“From you, knowing that you—”

“I didn’t make it quite as obvious as that,” said the Baron. “Don’t go in for crime, Ted, it isn’t your best medium. Try to give Anita something else to think about other than jewels, though, in—well, say ten minutes. Lorna and I won’t be back tonight, but I think you’ll manage without us.”

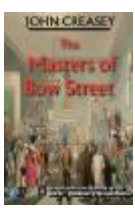
Series Information

Published or to be published by
House of Stratus

Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)
'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)
'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)
'Inspector West' (43 titles)
'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)
'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street
This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

‘The Baron’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron *(The Man in the Blue Mask) (1937)*
2. The Baron Returns *(The Return of the Blue Mask) (1937)*
3. The Baron Again *(Salute Blue Mask) (1938)*
4. The Baron at Bay *(Blue Mask at Bay) (1938)*
5. Alias the Baron *(Alias Blue Mask) (1939)*
6. The Baron at Large *(Challenge Blue Mask!) (1939)*
7. Versus the Baron *(Blue Mask Strikes Again) (1940)*
8. Call for the Baron *(Blue Mask Victorious) (1940)*
9. The Baron Comes Back *(1943)*
10. A Case for the Baron *(1945)*
11. Reward for the Baron *(1945)*
12. Career for the Baron *(1946)*
13. Blood Diamond *(The Baron and the Beggar) (1947)*
14. Blame the Baron *(1948)*
15. A Rope for the Baron *(1948)*
16. Books for the Baron *(1949)*
17. Cry for the Baron *(1950)*
18. Trap the Baron *(1950)*
19. Attack the Baron *(1951)*
20. Shadow the Baron *(1951)*
21. Warn the Baron *(1952)*
22. The Baron Goes East *(1953)*
23. The Baron in France *(1953)*
24. Danger for the Baron *(1953)*
25. The Baron Goes Fast *(1954)*
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron *(Deaf, Dumb and Blonde) (1954)*
27. Help from the Baron *(1955)*
28. Hide the Baron *(1956)*
29. The Double Frame *(Frame the Baron) (1957)*
30. Blood Red *(Red Eye for the Baron) (1958)*
31. If Anything Happens to Hester *(Black for the Baron) (1959)*
32. Salute for the Baron *(1960)*
33. The Baron Branches Out *(A Branch for the Baron) (1961)*
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy *(Bad for the Baron) (1962)*
35. A Sword for the Baron *(The Baron and the Mogul Swords) (1963)*
36. The Baron on Board *(The Mask of Sumi) (1964)*
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle *(1964)*
38. Sport for the Baron *(1966)*
39. Affair for the Baron *(1967)*
40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters *(1968)*

41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait *(1969)*
42. Last Laugh for the Baron *(1970)*
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying *(1971)*
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist *(1972)*
45. Burgle the Baron *(1973)*
46. The Baron - King Maker *(1975)*
47. Love for the Baron *(1979)*

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom *(1942)*
2. The Legion of the Lost *(1943)*
3. The Valley of Fear *(The Perilous Country) (1943)*
4. Dangerous Quest *(1944)*
5. Death in the Rising Sun *(1945)*
6. The Hounds of Vengeance *(1945)*
7. Shadow of Doom *(1946)*
8. The House of the Bears *(1946)*
9. Dark Harvest *(1947)*
10. The Wings of Peace *(1948)*
11. The Sons of Satan *(1948)*
12. The Dawn of Darkness *(1949)*
13. The League of Light *(1949)*
14. The Man Who Shook the World *(1950)*
15. The Prophet of Fire *(1951)*
16. The Children of Hate *(The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair) (1952)*
17. The Touch of Death *(1954)*
18. The Mists of Fear *(1955)*
19. The Flood *(1956)*
20. The Plague of Silence *(1958)*
21. Dry Spell *(The Drought) (1959)*
22. The Terror *(1962)*
23. The Depths *(1963)*
24. The Sleep *(1964)*
25. The Inferno *(1965)*
26. The Famine *(1967)*
27. The Blight *(1968)*
28. The Oasis *(1970)*
29. The Smog *(1970)*
30. The Unbegotten *(1971)*
31. The Insulators *(1972)*
32. The Voiceless Ones *(1973)*
33. The Thunder-Maker *(1976)*
34. The Whirlwind *(1979)*

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day *(Gideon of Scotland Yard) (1955)*
2. Seven Days to Death *(Gideon's Week) (1956)*
3. Gideon's Night *(1957)*
4. A Backwards Jump *(Gideon's Month) (1958)*
5. Thugs and Economies *(Gideon's Staff) (1959)*
6. Gideon Combats Influence *(Gideon's Risk) (1960)*
7. Gideon's Fire *(1961)*
8. A Conference for Assassins *(Gideon's March) (1962)*
9. Travelling Crimes *(Gideon's Ride) (1963)*
10. An Uncivilised Election *(Gideon's Vote) (1964)*
11. Criminal Imports *(Gideon's Lot) (1965)*
12. To Nail a Serial Killer *(Gideon's Badge) (1966)*
13. From Murder to a Cathedral *(Gideon's Wrath) (1967)*
14. Gideon's River *(1968)*
15. Darkness and Confusion *(Gideon's Power) (1969)*
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Sport) (1970)*
17. Gideon's Art *(1971)*
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard *(Gideon's Men) (1972)*
19. Impartiality Against the Mob *(Gideon's Press) (1973)*
20. Not Hidden by the Fog *(Gideon's Fog) (1975)*
21. Good and Justice *(Gideon's Drive) (1976)*
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits *(Gideon's Force) (1978)*

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge *(1942)*
2. Go Away to Murder *(Inspector West Leaves Town) (1943)*
3. An Apostle of Gloom *(Inspector West At Home) (1944)*
4. Inspector West Regrets *(1945)*
5. Holiday for Inspector West *(1946)*
6. Battle for Inspector West *(1948)*
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn *(Triumph for Inspector West) (1948)*
8. Inspector West Kicks Off *(Sport for Inspector West) (1949)*
9. Inspector West Alone *(1950)*
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf *(The Creepers) (1950)*
11. The Figure in the Dusk *(A Case for Inspector West) (1951)*
12. The Dissemblers *(Puzzle for Inspector West) (1951)*
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers *(The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay) (1952)*
14. Give a Man a Gun *(A Gun for Inspector West) (1953)*
15. Send Inspector West *(1953)*
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair *(A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer) (1954)*
17. Murder Makes Haste *(Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman) (1955)*
18. Murder: One, Two, Three *(Two for Inspector West) (1955)*
19. Death of a Postman *(Parcels for Inspector West) (1956)*
20. Death of an Assassin *(A Prince for Inspector West) (1956)*
21. Hit and Run *(Accident for Inspector West) (1957)*
22. The Trouble at Saxby's *(Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death) (1957)*
23. Murder, London - New York *(1958)*
24. Strike for Death *(The Killing Strike) (1958)*
25. Death of a Racehorse *(1959)*
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims *(1959)*
27. Murder on the Line *(1960)*
28. Death in Cold Print *(1961)*
29. The Scene of the Crime *(1961)*
30. Policeman's Dread *(1962)*
31. Hang the Little Man *(1963)*
32. Look Three Ways at Murder *(1964)*
33. Murder, London - Australia *(1965)*
34. Murder, London - South Africa *(1966)*
35. The Executioners *(1967)*
36. So Young to Burn *(1968)*

37. Murder, London - Miami *(1969)*
38. A Part for a Policeman *(1970)*
39. Alibi for Inspector West *(1971)*
40. A Splinter of Glass *(1972)*
41. The Theft of Magna Carta *(1973)*
42. The Extortioners *(1974)*
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime *(1978)*

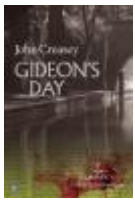
‘The Toff’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

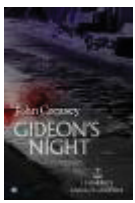
1. Introducing the Toff *(It’s the Toff!) (1938)*
2. The Toff Goes On *(1939)*
3. The Toff Steps Out *(1939)*
4. Here Comes the Toff *(1940)*
5. The Toff Breaks In *(1940)*
6. Salute the Toff *(1941)*
7. The Toff Proceeds *(1941)*
8. The Toff Goes to Market *(1942)*
9. The Toff Is Back *(1942)*
10. The Toff on the Trail *(short stories) (1942)*
11. The Toff among the Millions *(1943)*
12. Accuse the Toff *(1943)*
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest *(The Toff and the Curate) (1944)*
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion *(1944)*
15. Feathers for the Toff *(1945)*
16. The Toff and the Lady *(1946)*
17. Poison for the Toff *(The Toff on Ice) (1946)*
18. Hammer the Toff *(1947)*
19. The Toff in Town *(1948)*
20. The Toff Takes Shares *(1948)*
21. The Toff and Old Harry *(1949)*
22. The Toff on Board *(1949)*
23. Fool the Toff *(1950)*
24. Kill the Toff *(1950)*
25. A Knife for the Toff *(1951)*
26. A Mask for the Toff *(The Toff Goes Gay) (1951)*
27. Hunt the Toff *(1952)*
28. Call the Toff *(1953)*
29. The Toff Down Under *(Break the Toff) (1953)*
30. Murder Out of the Past *(short stories) (1953)*
31. The Toff at Camp *(The Toff at Butlins) (1954)*
32. The Toff at the Fair *(1954)*
33. A Six for the Toff *(A Score for the Toff) (1955)*
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea *(1955)*
35. Kiss the Toff *(Make-Up for the Toff) (1956)*
36. The Toff in New York *(1956)*
37. Model for the Toff *(1957)*
38. The Toff on Fire *(1957)*
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses *(1958)*
40. Terror for the Toff *(The Toff on the Farm) (1958)*

41. Double for the Toff *(1959)*
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride *(1959)*
43. A Rocket for the Toff *(1960)*
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped *(The Kidnapped Child) (1960)*
45. Follow the Toff *(1961)*
46. The Toff and the Toughs *(The Toff and the Teds) (1961)*
47. A Doll for the Toff *(1963)*
48. Leave It to the Toff *(1963)*
49. The Toff and the Spider *(1965)*
50. The Toff in Wax *(1966)*
51. A Bundle for the Toff *(1967)*
52. Stars for the Toff *(1968)*
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy *(1969)*
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels *(1970)*
55. Vote for the Toff *(1971)*
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets *(1972)*
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman *(1973)*
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy *(1975)*
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper *(1977)*

Select Synopses

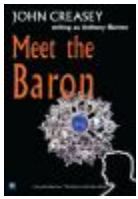


Gideon's Day
Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.



Gideon's Night
On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?

Gideon's Fire
Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home …



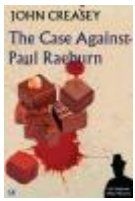
Meet the Baron
John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both.… Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequnces result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops …

Shadow The Baron
John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scotland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one know the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued. …

The House of the Bears
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's *'House of the Bears'*. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature

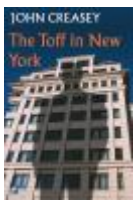
in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him …

Inspector West Takes Charge
Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



The Case Against Paul Raeburn
Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not eveything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears.....

Introducing The Toff
The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York
'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the *'Toff'* is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hallís arms.

There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York.....

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